

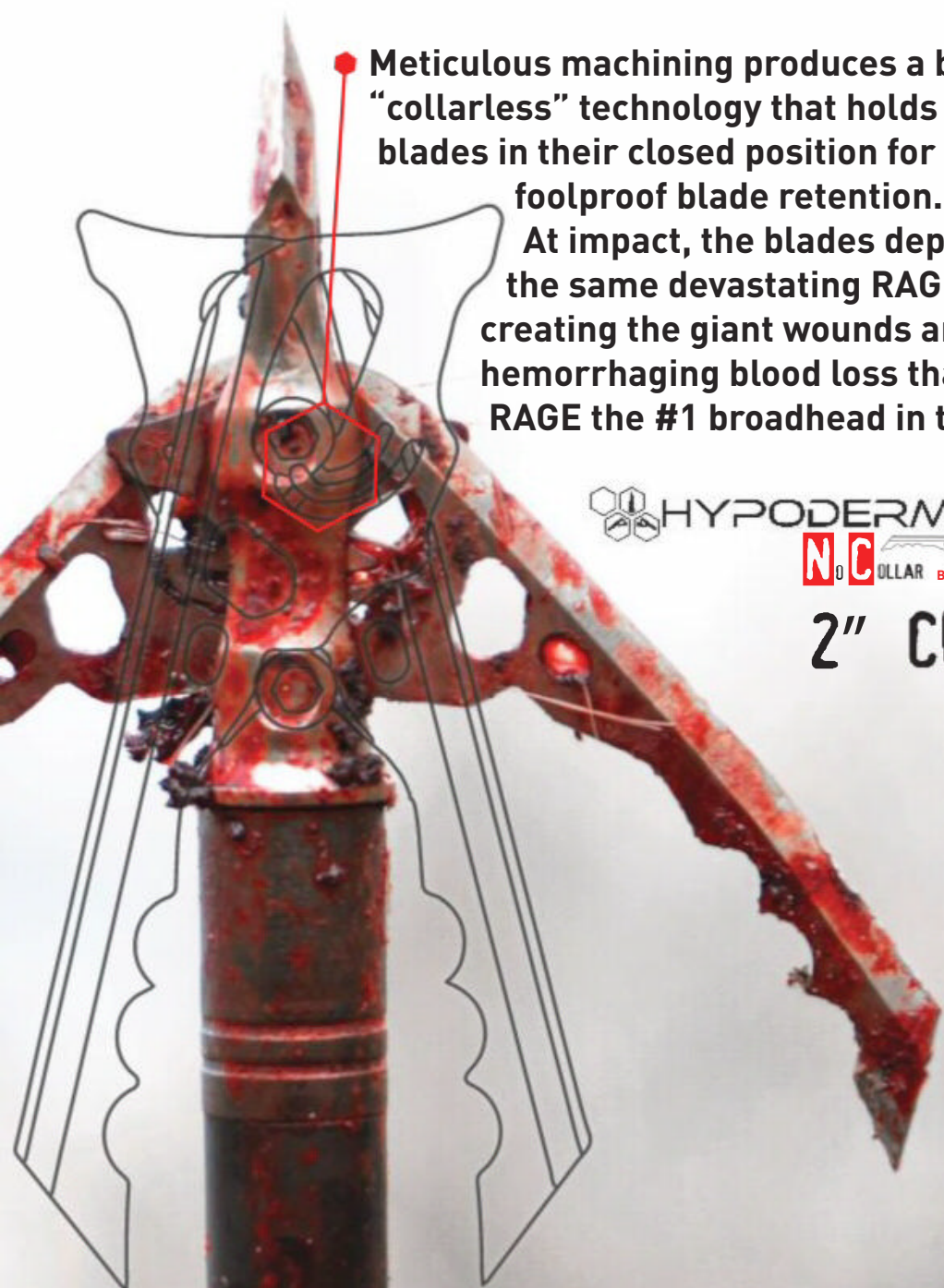
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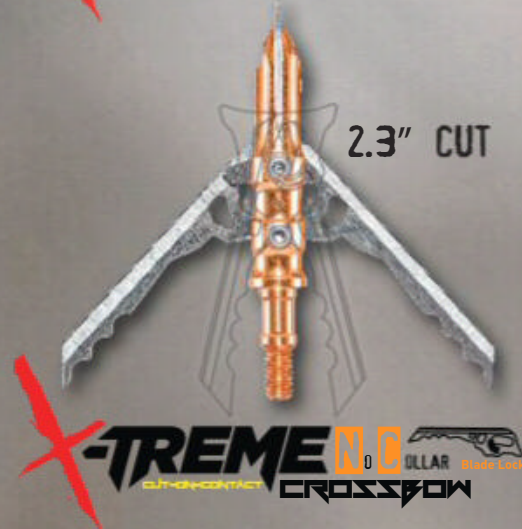
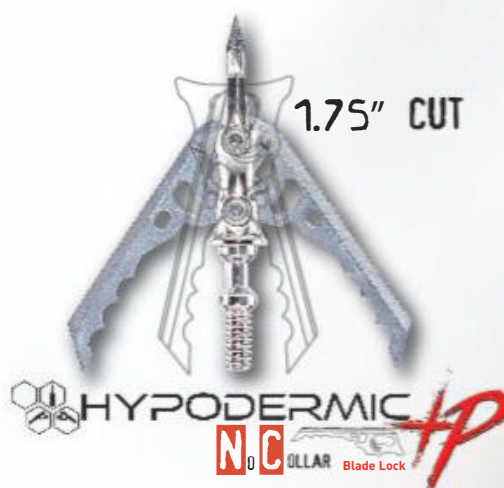
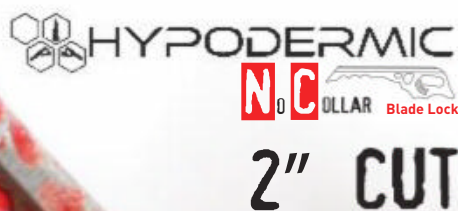
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ULTIMATE HUNTS

CURSE OF THE BROWN BEAR

BUMP-AND-RUN IBEX

YUKON RAMS & BULLS

DECOYING BIG MULE DEER

ELK AGAINST ALL ODDS

AND MORE...

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Looking Ahead

WE'RE NOT ABLE TO SEE EXACTLY WHAT'S COMING THIS FALL, BUT WE HAVE TO KEEP OUR EYES OPEN.

I AM NOT ALONE when I pose the rhetorical question, "What's going to happen in the fall of 2020?"

I could follow that question with a long, political rant regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, but I will spare you the pain. Suffice it to say, the so-called experts have been wrong about pretty much everything. And the doomsday media isn't helping.

As we all try to dig out of this crisis and work back toward some kind of normalcy, many of you have fall hunting plans in danger of being deemed "nonessential." The other end of this two-sided equation: The outfitters, lodges, hotels, restaurants, and other businesses that depend on hunting, do not consider hunters to be nonessential. They are the ones that are really hurting. Most outfitters and lodges have already lost their entire spring and summer hunting and fishing seasons. Some have preemptively cancelled their entire 2020 fall season, and some will end up going out of business completely. And nobody cares, especially in Canada.

Of course, if we advocate the re-opening of travel and infection rates spike, then we will be the evil ones. Catch-22.

I certainly don't have the answer to the question of what the fall will bring. All we can do is monitor travel restrictions in the states, provinces, and countries we plan to visit. Think ahead, drive instead of fly if possible, reschedule if you must, but don't give up on your dream hunt just yet.

In the meantime, you can live vicariously through the authors who have written about their big game adventures in this issue, our *Big Game Special*. We kick things off with one of the best hunting trips I have ever experienced — my 2019 brown bear hunt in Alaska. It was my third consecutive brown bear hunt, but this one had a much better ending.

On page 24, Frank Noska, one of the continent's most accomplished bowhunt-



Anticipation, one of the great rewards of planning adventure hunts, is being dulled by uncertainty, but don't stop looking forward.

ers, struggles to complete a very difficult assignment. I tasked him with ranking the 29 North American big game species according to specific parameters. Frank accepted the challenge, and I'm sure it will generate considerable debate among bowhunters. And Frank will probably avoid my calls from now on...

Then we feature one of the adventures of Pedro Ampuero, a globe-trotting bowhunter from Madrid, Spain. Pedro bowhunted a special species of ibex in Pakistan (it's amazing where a bowhunter with big dreams can end up), and he always returns from his hunts with spectacular photos, a great story to tell, and an exceptional animal.

Those articles are followed by stories of Fannin sheep hunting by Zack Walton, decoying big muley bucks by Contributor Danny Farris, whitetail tactics from Tim Kent, snow-covered elk hunting with Contributor Ron Niziolek, and calling bull moose in the Yukon with Tom Edgington.

These adventure stories could be considered "seed" for potential adventures to come. They are intended to spark desire and goal-setting in you. We all dream of a special hunt for a special animal. And I, for one, don't plan to let a tiny virus keep me from realizing those dreams. If it succeeds, I'll just create new dreams.



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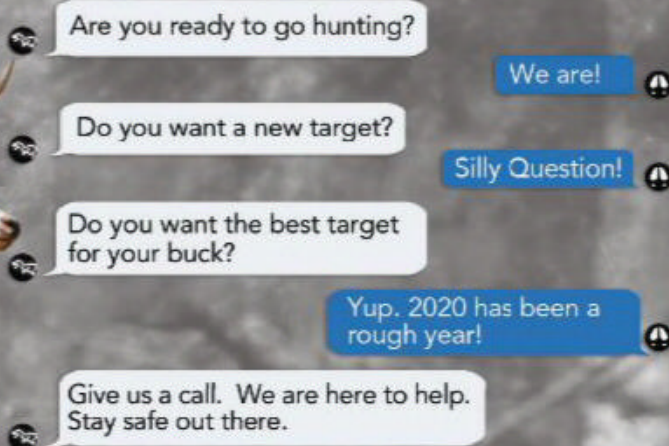
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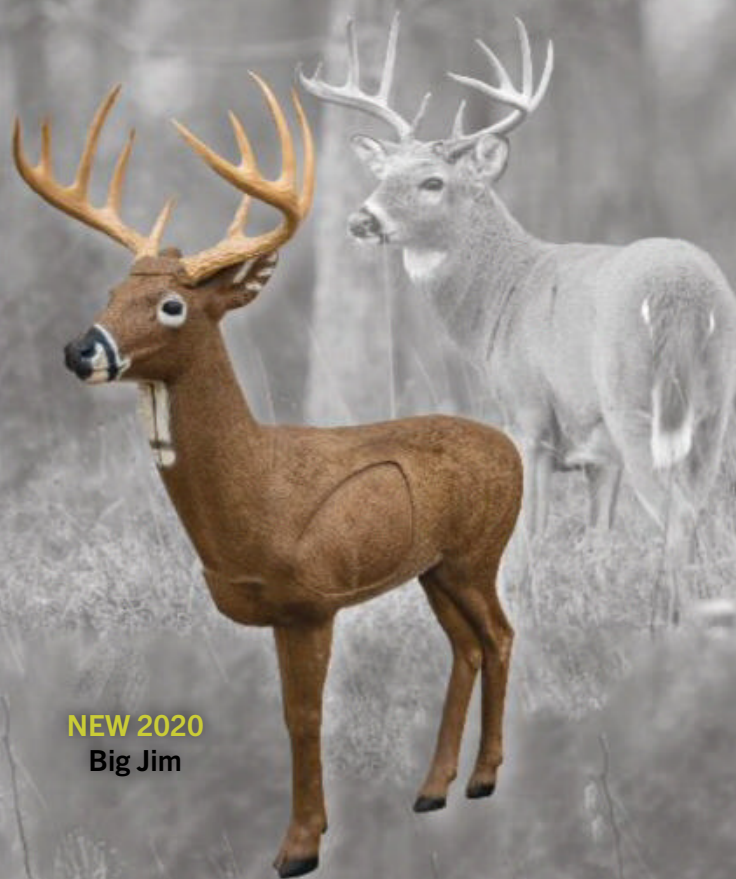
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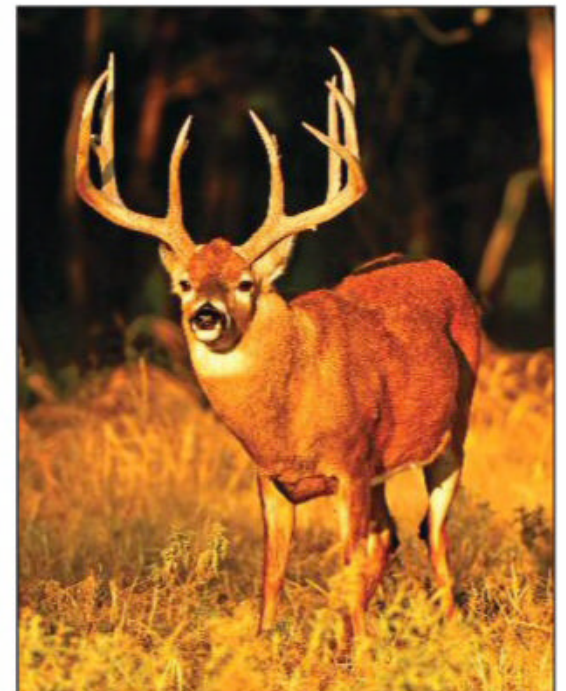
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Brian K. Strickland

Taking Stock In Optics

NEXT TO YOUR BOW AND ARROWS, QUALITY OPTICS ARE A BOWHUNTER'S BEST FRIEND.

FROM OVER a half-mile away, I could tell the buck was worth a closer look. His velvet rack seemed enormous as he fed across the open alpine slope, and with a quick view through the spotter, I knew in an instant this was the buck I wanted to hang my tag on.

I watched from a distance for the next few days, waiting for him to make a wrong move. More than once I planned a stalk, but a capricious mountain breeze or the buck's sixth sense kept me well out of bow range. However, time is often a bowhunter's best friend, and on the morning of the fifth day, all the hours of glassing finally started to show some promise.

With the buck feeding toward a crease in the terrain and the morning thermals holding steady, I eased up the

crease hoping for an encounter. With each passing second, I grew more nervous knowing at any moment he would appear, and when his fuzzy horns came bobbing around the brush mere yards away, I held my breath. At nine yards, I knew he would figure things out pretty quick. However, arrows fly fast in the thin alpine air, and after a quick 40-yard sprint, he was down for the count.

If I were to look back at most of my successful bowhunting adventures over

the years, I would be hard-pressed to remember one when a pair of quality optics and/or rangefinder weren't involved.

Luckily, great optics aren't hard to find. Better yet, you don't need to spend a small fortune to secure a quality pair. Take for instance **Maven** (mavenbuilt.com), a direct-to-consumer company. Although they offer a full line of binoculars, their new [1] **S.2** (\$995) compact spotter is what caught my eye this year. First off, at only 34 oz. and measuring less than 12", the S.2 is perfect for backcountry hunts. It also features a 12-27X magnification range with a 56mm objective lens, so it has plenty of power to spot game. The magnesium/polymer frame feels solid in the hand, and thanks to the Abbe-Koenig prism and crystal-clear fluorite objective lens, it delivers edge-to-edge sharpness and clarity.

TRACT Optics (tractoptics.com), another direct-to-consumer business, has added the new [2] **TORIC 10x50** (\$784). With their 50mm objective lenses they grab even more light than their award winning 10x42 predecessor. Combine this with Schott HT glass and multiple lens and prism coatings, and you have an affordable pair of water and fogproof optics that provide excellent image quality, clarity and superior light transmission. Like all TRACT optics, they're backed by their Assurance Lifetime Warranty.

Although 10x42's tend to be the go-to optics for most bowhunters, 12x50's are gaining in popularity. **SIG SAUER's** (sigsauer.com) answer to this growing demand is the [3] **ZULU7 12x50** (\$1,039.99). Weighing just under 32 oz. and measuring 6.8", these open-hinge gems are ideal with either a tripod or a steady hand. They incorporate SIG's advanced HDX optical systems comprised of both High Definition (ED) and High Transmittance (HT) glass for ultra-high resolution and light transmission. Enhancing their brightness is the highly efficient, anti-reflection Spectracote lens coating. When you couple this with the many other features the ZULU7 has, you'll be hard-pressed to find a better open-country option.

Bushnell (bushnell.com) seems to always stretch the limit in both price and quality, and the new [4] **Engage X 10x42mm** (\$363.99) is just another example. Designed with a lightweight, IPX7 waterproof construction that is 23% lighter than its Engage DX cousin, the new binoculars are ideal for extended use in the field. They feature Bushnell's ED Prime Glass, which delivers exceptional color, resolution, and contrast, and the fully multi-coated lenses are



Once I have my bow and arrows in hand, the next thing I grab as I head out hunting is my optics.



equipped with their proprietary EXO Barrier lens technology for protection against water, fog, dust, and debris.

Burris (burrisoptics.com) [5] **Signature HD** (\$479-\$599) series are also a great choice when you're wanting to save a few greenbacks but still have quality optics in your hands. With models of 8x42, 10x42, and 12x50, every optical need is covered. And with the HD-coated lenses and BAK-4 prisms, the Signature HD series delivers optimum resolution, clarity, sharpness, and light transmission. They feature an open-bridge design to minimize weight, while the rubber-armored, nitrogen-filled housing is fog and waterproof.

With over a century of optics-building technology behind them, **Nikon** (nikon-sportoptics.com) needs no introduction. Their latest addition, the [6] **Monarch HG 30mm Series** (\$949.95-\$969.95), is built with features like the unique Field Flatteners lens system, which delivers an extremely wide 8.3-degree field of view while maintaining excellent image quality throughout. The extra-low dispersion glass and added multilayer coatings to the lenses and prisms ensure up to 92% light transmission and true-to-life color fidelity in low-light situations.

Although **Styrka** (styrkastrong.com) produces more budget-friendly optics

like their S3 and S5 series, their flagship [7] **S9 Series** (\$1,199.95-\$1,799.95) boasts everything you'd want in quality glass. Sure, they cost more, but take one look through them and you'll see why. Available in 8x42, 10x42, and 15x56 configurations, the foundation of the S9 Series is the extra-low dispersion glass and high-grade SK-15 phase and Dielectric-coated prisms. All lens surfaces are coated with Styrka's proprietary anti-reflective flat broadband coating to ensure brightness, color, and sharpness.

Meopta (meoptasportoptics.com) adds to their impressive optics line this year with the new [8] **MeoPro Air** (\$979.99-\$999.99). With options in both 8x42 and 10x42, this is Meopta's first binocular with a modern open-hinge design that features a magnesium-alloy chassis that is rubber-reinforced to provide both durability and an ergonomic feel. The MeoPro Air's ED glass, with Meopta's proprietary lens coating, provides edge-to-edge clarity, sharpness, and contrast.

With autofocus capabilities, **Steiner's** (steiner-optics.com) [9] **Predator AF** (\$349.99 & \$459.99) series is unlike anything out today. Available in both 8x30 and 10x42 configurations, the Predator AF eliminates the need for a center-focus wheel, but instead uses dual diopter adjustment rings to allow precise tun-

ing to the user's eyes. Its Color Adjusted Transmission lens coating ensures game is sharp and stands in contrast to their environment, and with Steiner's ultra-bright glass, you can expect exceptional low-light capabilities.

For those wanting to combine range-finding capabilities in a binocular package, which seems to be trending today, then check out **GPO's** (gp-optics.com) [10] **RangeGuide 10x50** (\$1,699.99). Coupled with GPObright high-transmission lens coatings and their double-HD laminated 50mm objective lenses, they deliver exceptional light transmission. At only 6.3" tall and weighing just 35 oz., its size compares to traditional 42mm binoculars thanks to its armor-coated magnesium body. Plus, with the ability to grab ranges out to over 3,000 yards while in angle-compensation mode, as well as line-of-sight and scan modes, the RangeGuide 10x50 is certainly worth a look.

Leupold's (leupold.com) new [11] **RX-Fulldraw 4** (\$714.99) rangefinder is the very first rangefinder to offer bowhunters a true custom ballistics solution designed specifically to help users shrink the gaps. By incorporating arrow weight, velocity, and peep height, it can calculate a shoot-to distance for any angle, and any compound bow. It also features Leupold's Flightpath technology, which

TRIED AND TRUE

uses the same ballistics solution to determine if your arrow has a clear flight path between you and the target. It also provides fast ranging out to 1,200 yards, while providing bright and clear images with its 6X magnification.

Although **Vortex** (vortexoptics.com) has a reputation for producing quality binos and spotters, their rangefinder line ticks up a notch with the new [12] **Impact 1000** (\$269.99). This unit quickly grabs targets from 5 to 1,000 yards through its 6X lens. And with an angle compensation up to 60 degrees, as well as Line of Sight and Scan modes, the Impact 1000 has about all you need.

With the idea to produce a rangefinder to fit the need of virtually any hunter, **Muddy** (gomuddy.com) jumps into the rangefinder space this year with the [13] **LR650, LR850, and LR1300** (\$179–\$229) series. With ranging capabilities from 650 to 1,300 yards, they are ideal for both bowhunters and gun hunters alike. Each unit features an ABS housing and durable rubber trim with large grip pads on both sides of the chassis, while their 6X magnification, 26mm glass lens offers a clear view. Each also offers true angle



compensation, as well as an integrated scan mode that allows you to quickly range multiple targets at any angle.

The [14] **XLR1600** and **XLR2000** (\$249.99–\$299.99) were added to **Halo's** (halooptics.com) line of rangefinders this year. Along with 6X magnification, premium lenses, and scanning capabilities, they incorporate Halo's Angle Intelligence technology to ensure you'll know the precise shooting distance, regardless of the angle.

Lastly, **Hawke** (hawkeoptics.com)

launches the [15] **Vantage Series** (\$259–\$299). With three models that provide readings from 400, 600, and 900 meters, they sport a fully multi-coated optical system with BK-7 prisms, 6X magnification, and an adjustable diopter for both high light transmission and true-color optical clarity. Additional features include Standard and Horizontal modes for those relatively straight line-of-site situations, Rain mode (overlooks raindrops), Hunt mode (ignores interference from vegetation), and the all-important Angle mode. BH

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BLINK OF AN EYE.



MY EYES RACED through the inky-black alders trying to see the brown bear before it saw me. A life — the bear's or mine — could easily depend on who won that race.

My guide, Chet, was behind me whispering but I couldn't make out what he was saying, so with uneasy tension on the bowstring, I crept toward the spot where a nine-foot brown bear had been fishing moments earlier.

I could see nothing. Hear nothing. Except a salmon flopping in the shallow water. And that whispering. It seems Chet thought I was getting too far away from him and his .375 H&H. When cameraman Mike Emery joined the whisper chorus to declare that camera light was gone, I slowly backedpedaled in the knee-deep water and followed my compatriots back to the boat.

In the twilight, my mind wandered as the jetboat rhythmically swung back and forth on Alaska's winding Iliamna River. I was thinking about my friend, mentor, and predecessor, the late Dwight Schuh, and his rivalry with brown bears. They were his "nemesis" animal. Eight times, Dwight ventured to the wilds of Alaska in pursuit of a brown bear with a bow, and eight times he came home alone. As Dwight's health declined, I unwittingly gathered up his banner as the champion of the

"Bowhunter Magazine brown bear curse." In both 2017 and 2018, I hunted the Togiak NWR for brown bears and I, too, came home alone. I thought that was probably the end of it.

Then one fine day my friend, Utah bowhunter Brett Foster, called and asked if I wanted to take his place on a brown bear hunt he could not make with his brother Grant. It was a sign to try again.

That's the genesis of my 2019 hunt with Ray and Linda Williams of Iliamna Bruin Adventures. We arrived in Pedro Bay, Alaska, on September 19, and quickly discovered this was not going to be a typical brown bear hunt. The lodge on Lake Iliamna is at one end of a 15-mile road. The other end terminates at Cook Inlet, where Ray and his son Chet load commercial fishing boats on a semi-trailer and haul them over a pass in the Chigmit Mountains to Lake Iliamna. From there, fishermen can navigate to Bristol Bay, saving themselves a 1,000-mile trip around and through False Pass in the Aleutian Islands. The Williams family has been operating this business for nearly 75 years.

About halfway along the 15-mile road is a bridge over the Iliamna River, which gave us access to miles of brown bear habitat through the use of boats with jet-drive outboards.

After a huge breakfast the first morning, we got a preview

BY CURT WELLS, EDITOR



The Bowhunter Magazine brown bear curse came to an end when I was finally able to arrow this beautiful bear that squared 8' 2". After many trials and tribulations, it just happened.

WHEN IT HAPPENS, IT HAPPENS

of what we were in for when we spotted four brown bears on the road before we even got to the bridge! Chet, Mike, and I floated the river downstream, and by 10 a.m. we'd spotted five more bears! When the river went quiet, we headed back to the lodge for coffee and homemade rolls. "Supper" was at 2 p.m., and the amount and variety of food Linda put together for each meal was far beyond anything in my experience.

While jetting upstream that afternoon, we saw six more bears on the way to a treestand along the bank. From the tree, we watched salmon spawn in the ultra-clear water and saw 12 more bears scavenging and fishing the riverbanks. That brought the total to 27 different bears spotted on the first day!

None of these bears were what we were looking for, but that's typical of brown bear hunting. You're looking for the right bear and while this area is not known for 10-foot bears, nine-footers are possible. I'd set my standard at eight foot-plus, mostly because Dwight passed an eight-footer on this same hunt years earlier and always regretted it. The curse had to die.

There were three other hunters in camp, Grant Foster (UT), Ernie Santana (FL), and Kevin Ahearn (NY). The plan was to rotate who went upriver, downriver, hunted the lake shoreline, or cruised and glassed from the road. On the second morning, it was our turn to work the road. Just below the mountain pass, we spotted a gorgeous blonde bear deep in a picturesque valley, but it wasn't big enough to warrant an arduous stalk. We saw one other young bear before we got back to the lodge.

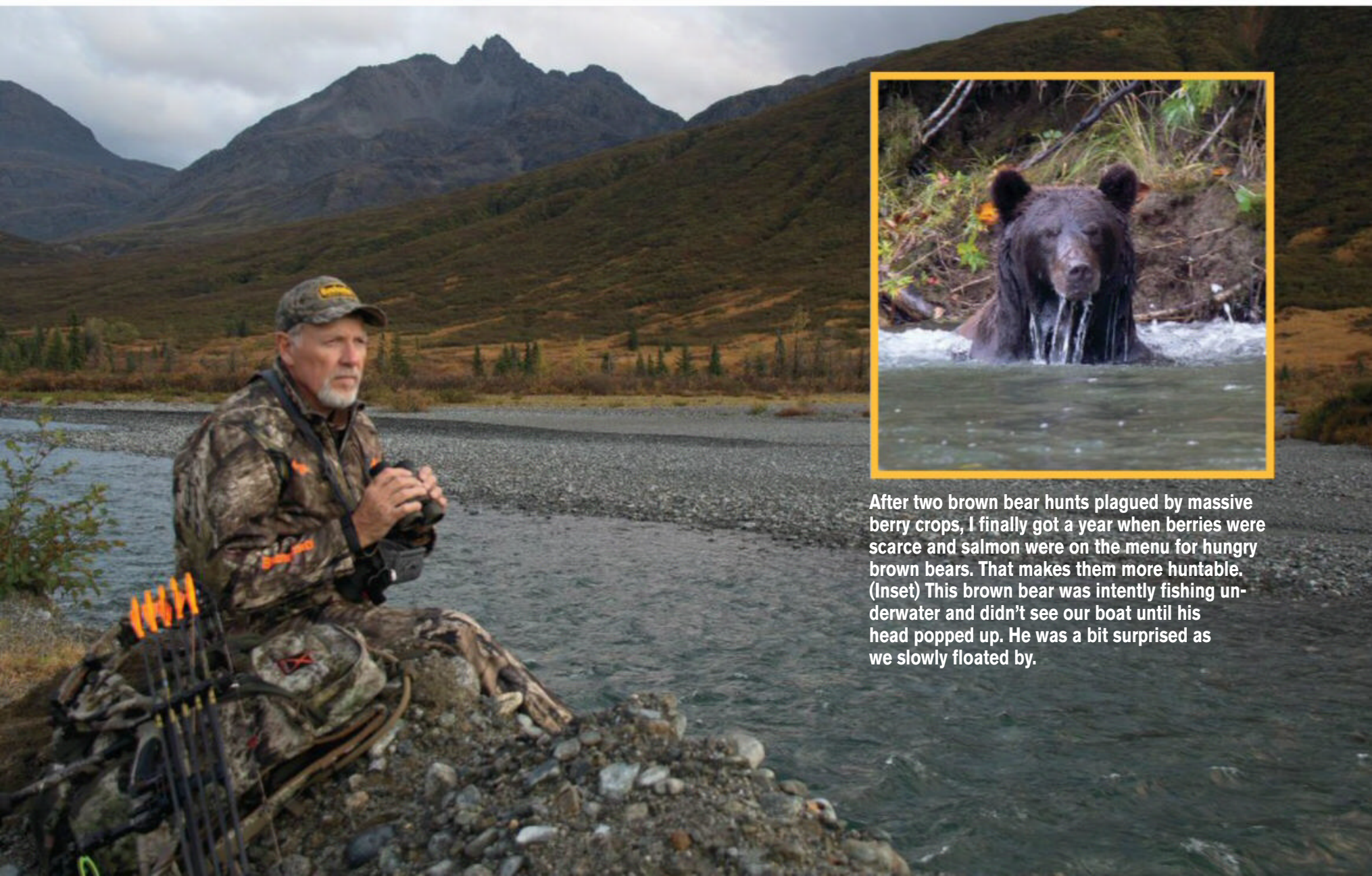
With so many bears lurking on the riverbanks, we abandoned the treestand tactic and kept searching the riverbanks for a stalk opportunity. It's how I wanted to take a brown bear anyway — on the ground, stalking into bow range. That's where the thrill lives.

That evening, we ran upriver as far as we could and beached the boat with a two-fold purpose: Let the river settle down for the evening drift, and walk upstream about 100 yards to glass an open valley for bears. Within minutes, a seven-footer strolled around a bend 150 yards upstream and meandered into our wind. I assumed it would bolt, but not so. The bear instantly turned and followed his nose directly toward us, wading across the river. Chet worked the bolt on his .375 and started talking to the bear. No reaction. I had an arrow nocked, but I did not want to shoot this bear. When it got to 25 yards, Chet broke some branches and the bear reluctantly turned and sauntered into the willows. We hadn't walked 40 feet back toward the boat, when we bumped into a sow and two cubs that thankfully ducked back into the bush. This place was crawling with brown bears.

Our evening float required me to man a paddle to help keep the boat moving straight, around bends, and past downed trees. Only the screeching of gulls and splashing of spawning salmon broke the tranquility as we slowly drifted on the current, as silent as death. Surreal seems an insufficient word.

Anglers occasionally float the river, so the sight of a passing boat is mostly tolerated by the bears. Mature boars run, but sows and cubs often stand their ground. The river was only 30 yards wide in some spots, so it was a little unnerving to drift past a sow and cubs standing on the bank. One grouchy sow, with cubs gathered at her side, swatted a tree and huffed loudly, threatening us. She couldn't have been 15 yards away as we drifted by holding our breath. Our boat had no room for an angry sow brown bear.

We rounded a bend and there was a boar in the water up to his neck, making it impossible to judge his size. I reached for my bow as the bear swam beside the boat at 10 yards. When he found a place to scramble up the bank, we saw a two-foot slash on his back that looked like he'd been opened up with a sword. Another bear must have done it, as this was an every other year



After two brown bear hunts plagued by massive berry crops, I finally got a year when berries were scarce and salmon were on the menu for hungry brown bears. That makes them more huntable. (Inset) This brown bear was intently fishing underwater and didn't see our boat until his head popped up. He was a bit surprised as we slowly floated by.

WHITETAIL
HUNTERS,
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WHEN IT HAPPENS, IT HAPPENS

fall unit and these bears hadn't been hunted for almost two years. It was a good bear, but there was never a chance for a shot. By the time darkness ended our float, we had counted a total of 34 bears for the day. We stopped counting after that.

The next morning, we boated to a bay at the head of Lake Iliamna to glass a small inlet creek that held spawning salmon. Only a sow and two cubs showed up, but I enjoyed sitting in the boat's cabin listening to Ray's stories of a unique life in Alaska.

That afternoon we ran upriver, but the wind switched and flowed downriver with us, drastically reducing bear sightings.

Day Four was similar. We worked the road system in the morning, but didn't see much. Morning hunting for brown bears is seldom fruitful, but most hunters, like me, want to make maximum use of their time, so guides tend to humor them.

The afternoon plan was to run up a different fork in the river. That's when the boat wreck happened. Just as Chet was negotiating a sharp turn, we slid over a submerged log that "stole the suck" of our jet drive. He lost control, and we hit the root wad of a fallen tree head on. Fortunately, Mike was rolling the camera at the time, or it would have been in the water. We got a little banged up, and the impact cracked the bow of the boat, but not so bad that we couldn't continue. We didn't see much during that float, until we spotted the fishing bear mentioned in the opening paragraph.

The fifth morning was uneventful due to strong winds, but the calmer afternoon was a different story. There were bears everywhere. One decent bear ducked into the bush as we went by, so we beached the boat and snuck down a well-worn bear trail to see if he would return. It was spooky standing amongst fresh bear scat, half-eaten salmon, and minutes-old tracks waiting for a bear to walk out at 20 yards. What if a sow and cubs showed up first? I guess that's where the excitement lives.

The bear didn't show, so we continued upriver. When we got to a spot called the Sushi Bar, a gorgeous bear was laying in the mud digging for a salmon carcass. It trotted lazily into the bush, so we kept going. A few hundred yards upstream, another bear was feeding on salmon. We saw him first, so we made a quick stalk to get a closer look. A short rain squall helped cover our approach, and we got within 43 yards of the unsuspecting bear. But it was a seven-footer, so we retreated.

The wind was perfect as we started another ghost-like float downriver. Just above the Sushi Bar, we quietly beached the boat and snuck through a logjam to see if the gorgeous bear was back out. That's when Chet spotted two of the planet's scariest animals — brown bear cubs — playing on a log 40 yards away. And just to the left, at 30 yards, the sow was bedded in the sand! Had she raised her head, we would've been in serious trouble, so we slinked back to the boat. Whew!

The rest of our float was awesome. It seemed there was a bear on the bank every 100 yards, but none were mature boars. That is, until we came around a sharp bend. A nine-footer was standing in the water ripping a salmon in half. It didn't even look at us. I struggled to decide whether to paddle like crazy to keep us out of a downed tree or grab my bow and try to get a shot off. It's legal to shoot from a drifting boat, but that's not how I wanted to take my bear. In an effort to slow us down, Chet grabbed an overhanging branch but it snapped, and the bear was gone. It all happened at the worst possible spot on the river and was over in seconds. The stench of the **Bowhunter** brown bear curse hung heavy in the air.

The wind howled and rain pelted the metal roof of the bunkhouse all night long, but no matter. I was snuggled in my bed alternating between sleep and the recognition that my hunt was half over. Would I ever see the right bear in the right place? Would Mother Nature steal more than the morning I was surely about to lose? Would the curse prevail? All questions with no answers.

As we skinned my brown bear, this bear walked into this beautiful scene that describes Alaska in one photo. (Inset) One morning, while getting ready to run the river, this brown bear searched for salmon with no regard to my guide Chet refueling the boats.





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WHEN IT HAPPENS, IT HAPPENS

The weather cleared midafternoon just as we ran upriver. That's when things started to happen. Chet just *happened* to look back up a small tributary creek as we motored by, and there was a good bear chasing salmon. There just *happened* to be a high bank, almost like a dike, on the upstream side of the creek that allowed us to beach the boat unseen. The rapids in the creek *happened* to be loud enough to conceal our noise, and the wind *happened* to be flowing up the creek, carrying our scent away from the bear. We scrambled toward the edge of the creek to see the bear still foraging on the opposite bank 25 yards away, working its way upstream. Amazingly, there *happened* to be a wide, well-worn bear trail on our side of the creek that allowed us to silently parallel the bear. A screen of tall, yellow grass just *happened* to provide concealment as the three of us shadowed the beautifully furred brown bear.

At one point, the bear stood broadside, but branches covered its vitals. When it turned and started to quarter away up the steep bank, I felt things unraveling. But there just *happened* to be an opening in the yellow grass, which I stepped into and

drew my bow. I don't remember much after that. The bear was slowing waddling away at a quartering angle, so I aimed at its shoulder to allow for movement and pulled through the shot. Halfway through the seemingly slow-motion shot process, the bear doubled back to the right to go back to the water and my arrow just *happened* to hit the bear in the neck, severing the carotid artery. I did not see that.

The bear spun and stumbled, causing me to think I'd made a perfect shot and the 550-grain arrow broke the opposite shoulder. It ran six yards, spraying an unspeakable amount of blood, fell to the ground, rolled down the bank, and got its legs back. I was at full draw, but all the blood told me the bear was done. Releasing another arrow could have exposed our location, and if the bear charged across the creek, Chet would be forced to touch off his .375.

The bear stumbled down the bank toward the four-foot-deep creek. I wondered how we were going to get a 700-pound bear out of four feet of water. Just then, the bear fell dead against a small tree that *happened* to be there to stop him. The **Bowhunter** brown bear curse was over. I had killed a brown bear with a bow, on the ground, at 25 yards.

Chet retrieved the boat, which we then nosed up against the steep bank, tied it to a tree, and rolled the beast right into the boat! I wondered if that had ever *happened*? We dumped the bruin out onto a rocky bar, took photos in the setting sunlight, and Chet and I had it skinned before dark.

Still in a euphoric daze, I reflected back on our long history of brown bear hunts as the boat swung back and forth on the winding river. Counting the combined efforts of Dwight and myself, this was our 11th brown bear hunt. On 10 previous hunts, all the time, effort, and expense went unrewarded due to untold misfortunes or simple lack of luck. Then, in the span of 20 minutes, a series of unforeseen circumstances serendipitously came together.

How does that *happen*? **BH**

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

On this hunt, I shot a Hoyt RX-3, Gold Tip arrows with Lumenoks, Muzzy Trocars, Spot Hogg sight, Browning clothing in Mossy Oak Break-Up Country, and SIG SAUER rangefinding binoculars. The hunt was arranged by Bowhunting Safari Consultants (bow-huntingsafari.com), and my thanks to Brett Foster and congratulations to his brother Grant, who killed his brown bear two days later.

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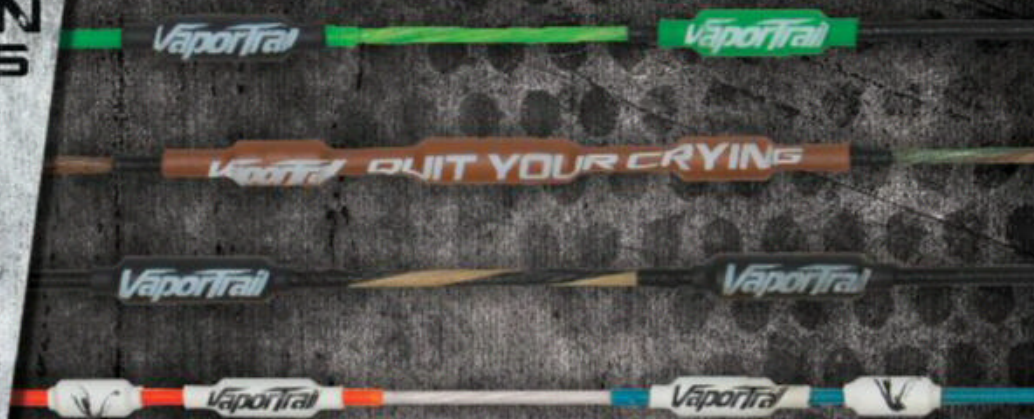
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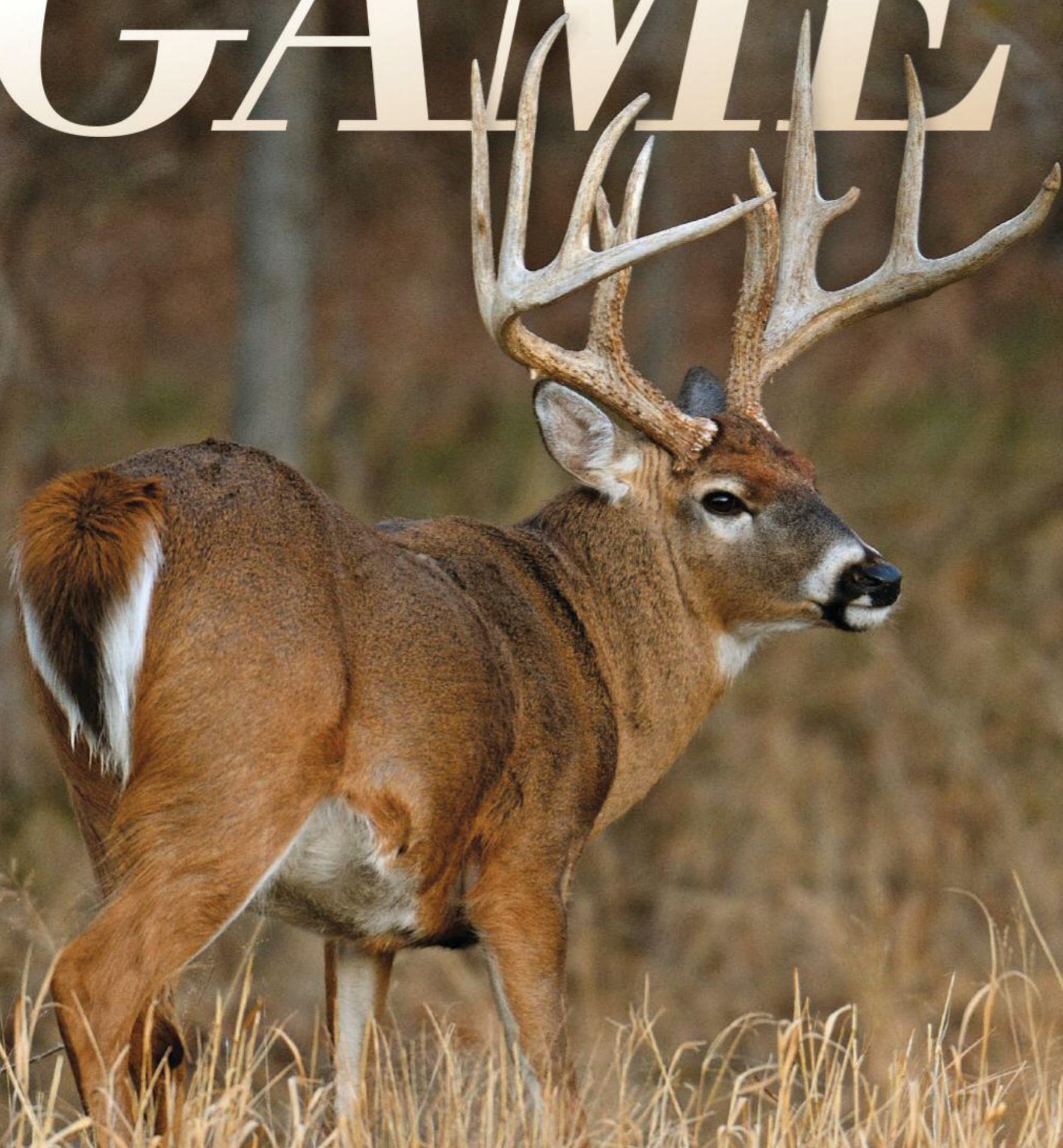
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NORTH AMERICAN **GAME**



- Ranking the 29 -

**YOU MAY THINK IT'S A FOOL'S ERRAND TO RANK
NORTH AMERICA'S BIG GAME ANIMALS, BUT IT'S FUN TO GIVE IT A TRY.**

When Editor Curt Wells first gave me the assignment to write this article, I was really looking forward to it. For me, the most rewarding part of writing any magazine article is it allows me to reflect on past bowhunts and adventures. When I construct an article, I begin by looking back at photos and reading my notes about past hunts. This rekindles memories as I relive the hunt all over again.

However, on this assignment, I have to admit that I had a tough time getting started. My instructions were to reflect on the adventures I've experienced while completing the archery Super Slam, which I have done twice, and to rank each of the 29 species of big game according to degree of difficulty. I was to disregard the financial cost, the odds of drawing a tag, or access to each animal. Each species was to be ranked only with regard to the animal's wariness, adaptability, and intelligence. And in all cases, I was to consider only *mature* animals.

After looking back on both Super Slams, I began to think maybe I should have turned down the assignment. This was not going to be easy. How do I choose the most difficult, or the easiest, animal to hunt? It's a challenge to take any big game animal with a bow. Each presents its own strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes, things simply fall into place and make a particular hunt seem easy. Or the opposite happens.

The more I pondered this concept, the more it started to clear up. Three species kept coming up in my mind. Based on my experience, and the criteria of wariness, adaptability, intelligence, and maturity, those three are Roosevelt elk, mule deer, and whitetail deer.

A mature Roosevelt bull elk is not an easy animal to kill with a bow. Part of the reason is they live in some of the thickest and nastiest rainforest habitat in North America. Roosevelt bulls

are also the least vocal of the three subspecies of elk. Both the American elk and the Tule elk bugle more during their rutting season. This makes them much easier to locate, stalk, and call into bow range. Roosevelt bulls do bugle and can be called effectively, no doubt, but they do not come to the call easily.

The first Roosevelt elk I shot was an Oregon bull that responded to our cow calls. That was back in 2006, when I held the much sought-after Oregon Powers elk tag. I stalked in relatively close to the bull before we tried to call him into range. The setup was perfect, and the 6x6 bull silently slipped into bow range of where I was lying in wait in a patch of tall ferns.

In 2018, I killed another good 6x6 Roosevelt bull in Oregon. After several days of failing to call one into bow range, I started sitting in a ladder stand overlooking an elk trail. On my last evening hunt, the bull materialized but took a different trail and never came close enough for a shot. When he walked out of sight, with only a few minutes of daylight remaining, I made a quick decision to climb down and attempt to stalk the bull. Some big blackberry bushes along an old road hid me, and I was getting close — when I got lucky. A cow elk led the 6x6 through an opening in the blackberry bushes, and I was able to get a shot. My friend Gary Martin, from Wisconsin, had a goal to tag a P&Y Roosevelt bull, but it took him six years to get it done. He never gave up, and he was eventually rewarded with a beautiful Boone and Crockett bull. Mature Rosie's are a tough challenge for bowhunters for sure.

Some would say that a mature mule deer buck is the most difficult critter to take with a bow and arrow. The first P&Y mule deer I killed was done by stalking, years ago in Colorado. Since then, I have arrowed a few more down in Mexico. My friend Randy Ulmer believes that a mature trophy mule deer

By Frank Noska, Contributor

PHOTO BY GEORGE BARNETT

is one of hardest animals to kill with a bow, and he has more experience hunting big muleys than anyone I know.

What makes these big mule deer so challenging? First, just finding a big mule deer buck is a challenge. Then you have the extreme difficulty of stalking within bow range of an animal as alert as this species is. The situation has to be perfect to have any chance at all. The terrain has to be conducive for a silent stalk, the wind has to be right, the temperament of the animal must be relaxed and calm, and the buck needs to be in a position that offers you at least a chance of getting a shot. So many things can and do go wrong when stalking a mature muley buck.

Successful mule deer bowhunters never quit looking for a big buck. Once they find one, they never stop trying until they are fortunate enough to get a shot. I took my best mule deer to date in Mexico in 2018. The terrain where this buck lived was not conducive to stalking, so I set up a blind on a water source that I figured he had to be using. It took several days of sitting in that blind, and passing on lesser deer, before he finally showed up. The buck appeared out of nowhere, and was drinking in an instant. He was facing me, so I had no shot. To make matters worse, three other bucks showed up to drink and got in the way. When the big one finished drinking, he turned and started to walk toward some thick brush, leaving me with a short window of opportunity, so I took the shot. Whether stalking or sitting in a blind, big mature muleys are never easy.

It is appropriate, although maybe a bit surprising to some, that a mature whitetail buck made the top of my list. In fact, this is the first animal I thought of when I started working on this article. More bowhunters have arrowed a whitetail deer



Wisconsin bowhunter Gary Martin poses with his hard-earned B&C Roosevelt bull. Gary put a lot of effort into this species.

than any other species of big game. This animal offers more opportunity than any other species in North America, and the majority of bowhunters, including me, cut their teeth in this sport by trying to arrow a whitetail buck.

Living in Alaska now, I get to bowhunt multiple species of big game every year, all of which provide their own unique challenges. While some of my Alaska adventures do stretch on for several days before I am successful, many are relatively short hunts. I am certainly not 100-percent successful on every

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I killed this mule deer buck in Mexico in 2018. A mature high-country mule deer buck is one of bowhunting's most formidable challenges.

Alaska hunt, but my track record for bringing home an animal is relatively high, and I attribute that success to all of the time, work, and effort I dedicate to these hunts.

With whitetails, it is a whole different story. I'm fortunate to have access to some of the best Kansas whitetail farm country there is, but the amount of time and days it takes me to be successful on a mature whitetail is greater than on most of my Alaska hunts. Some years, despite hunting multiple days in some of the best deer stands a person could ask for, I cannot

get an arrow into the mature whitetail buck that I want. I have experienced this same routine and outcome for many years.

Now, I have killed my share of good whitetail bucks, but I do not get one every year. My friends Curt Wells, Jim Willems, and John MacPeak — all accomplished bowhunters — share my sentiments about the difficulty of killing a mature whitetail buck. We all put in many hours, days, and weeks in the whitetail woods, and more often than not we come home empty-handed. I spent about two full weeks of hunting last year before a 5½-year-old 10-pointer came by and presented me with a shot. I had never seen that deer before.

Every November, when I leave Alaska and head to Kansas, I know I have my work cut out for me. The wariness, adaptability, intelligence, and sixth sense of the mature whitetail buck is second to none. Even with all of our proficient archery equipment and deer-hunting paraphernalia, the mature whitetail buck is still one of bowhunting's great challenges.

All of this, as well as the accompanying species rankings, are my opinion and could be debated by seasoned bowhunters forever. We all have own ideas, thoughts, and experiences that lead us to our own conclusions. As I mentioned, this was not easy, but I am satisfied with my Top Three: the whitetail deer, mule deer, and Roosevelt elk.

We do not bowhunt because it's easy. Successful bowhunters don't give up. We must be willing to identify and adapt to the specific skills, strengths, and weaknesses that each of these species present. But I don't discriminate, and I've always looked forward to trying to outsmart every single one of them. **BH**

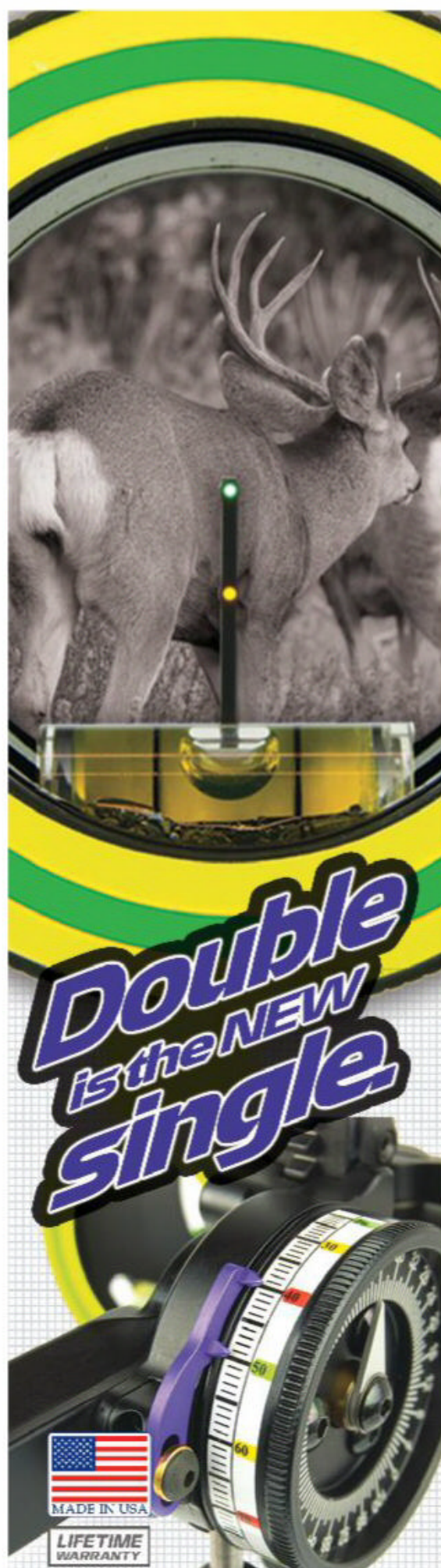
The author is the first, and only, bowhunter to have achieved two archery Super Slams of North American big game.

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You might be surprised to see the mature white-tail at the top of my list, but it is deserving. This is my 2019 Kansas buck.

RANKING THE 29

Ultimately, the most difficult species to hunt is the one that gives you the most trouble. Some bowhunters are successful on their first attempt at a particular species, while the next bowhunter has to hunt several times to get it done. For example, the Dall sheep was the last of the four sheep species that I killed. It was my "nemesis" animal. To make matters worse, and even harder to explain, I am an Alaska resident and I fly my own Super Cub, and it still took me several tries to get my first Dall ram. After I arrowed that first one, I tagged seven more Dall rams over the following nine years.

As mentioned earlier, Gary Martin had to hunt Roosevelt elk several times to get one, while I only went twice and took two Pope and Young bulls. Same with cougars: I went twice and took two toms, while friends of mine went on multiple cougar hunts before they got their cat. The late Dwight Schuh's nemesis animal was the brown bear, and Curt Wells struggled to cross moose off his list. This is precisely why there can be no definitive list that rates the difficulty level of all 29 species of big game in North America. Yes, each species possesses varying levels of wariness, adaptability, and intelligence, even among individuals of the same species, so all rankings are open to debate. Acknowledging that, here is the best list I can come up with based on my own personal experiences. It was a difficult task, but if you analyze it by thirds (top, middle, and bottom), it may be easier to find common ground. We bowhunters love to debate everything from camo patterns to broadheads, so have at it.

1. **WHITETAIL DEER** - Has it all, wariness, intelligence, adaptability + a "sixth sense"
2. **MULE DEER** - Solitary, extremely alert, beds carefully, giants are almost unkillable
3. **ROOSEVELT ELK** - Perfectly suited to habitat, not as vocal, elusive by nature
4. **COUES DEER** - Whitetails on caffeine, constant predation makes them extra wary
5. **COLUMBIAN BLACKTAIL DEER** - Like Roosevelt elk; live in steep, thick, wet country
6. **GRIZZLY BEAR** - Mature boars are old, wise, and nocturnal, with exceptional noses
7. **ALASKA BROWN BEAR** - Same as above
8. **BLACK BEAR** - Same as above
9. **COUGAR** - Pure intelligence, experts at evading, almost unkillable without dogs
10. **BIGHORN SHEEP** - Not so intelligent, but nervous and intolerant of intruders
11. **DESERT BIGHORN SHEEP** - Same as above
12. **STONE SHEEP** - Same as above
13. **DALL SHEEP** - Same as above
14. **ROCKY MOUNTAIN GOAT** - Not as intelligent as sheep, live in dangerous terrain
15. **BISON** - Wary and easily spooked, more elusive than moose
16. **AMERICAN ELK** - Vocal and callable, can be stalked when sounding off
17. **TULE ELK** - Same as above
18. **SHIRAS MOOSE** - Responds to calling, decoys, great nose but poor vision
19. **CANADA MOOSE** - Same as above
20. **ALASKA YUKON MOOSE** - Same as above
21. **SITKA BLACKTAIL DEER** - Still a deer, but can be stalked with some ease
22. **QUEBEC/LABRADOR CARIBOU** - Not sharp, unsure of human threat, stops if you're not a predator
23. **CENTRAL CANADA BARREN GROUND CARIBOU** - Same as above
24. **BARREN GROUND CARIBOU** - Same as above
25. **MOUNTAIN CARIBOU** - Same as above
26. **WOODLAND CARIBOU** - Same as above
27. **POLAR BEAR** - Has little fear of man, which makes him vulnerable.
28. **PRONGHORN ANTELOPE** - Easy access, easy to kill P&Y at water; would be much higher on list if being stalked
29. **MUSKOX** - Instinctive defense posture of forming a circle doesn't work well with humans

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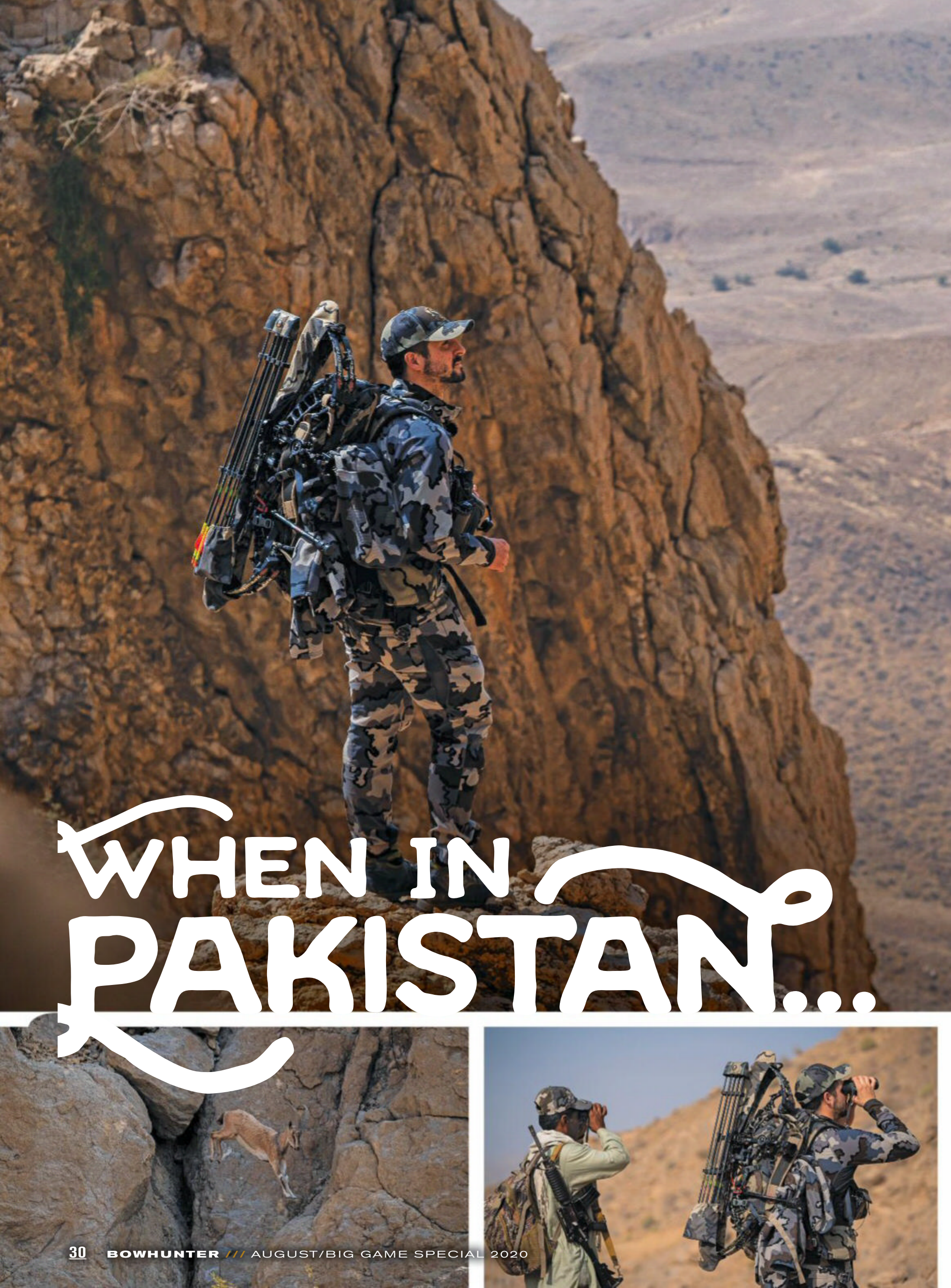
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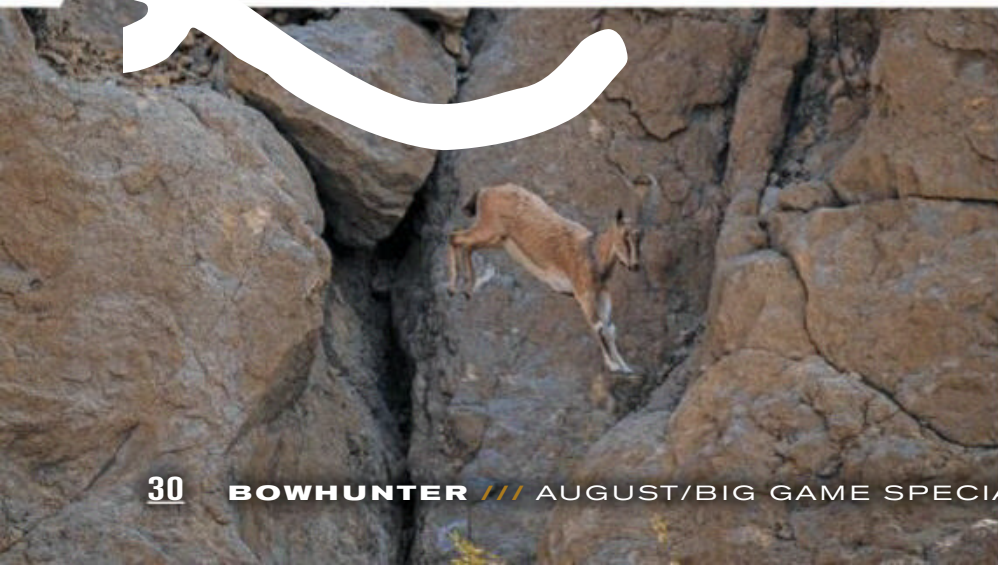
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WHEN IN PAKISTAN...



WHEN HUNTING IN THE REMOTE MOUNTAINS OF PAKISTAN, YOU MUST ALWAYS LISTEN TO AND TRUST YOUR GUIDE.

Looking out the window as we drove out of Karachi, Pakistan, I could only think about how much of a stranger I am to places like this, and how much more comfortable I feel in remote and wild places. The traffic was crazy. Cars, trucks, rickshaws, donkey carts in every direction, and despite no one seeming to follow any kind of driving rules, there were no accidents. Experiencing this chaos firsthand makes you understand a lot of things. What a lot of people would consider scary uncertainty, is a normal way of life here.

Ejaz Ali, one of the main guides in Pakistan from Shikar Safaris, picked us up at the airport and drove us three hours north to the town of Dureji. Located in the province of Baluchistan, Dureji is on the border of the Sindh Province and the Kirthar National Park. This town is one of the main conservation areas of southern Pakistan where you can hunt Sindh ibex (*Capra aegagrus blythi*), my goal for this trip.

Since the first studies and surveys took place around 20 years ago and a conservation program was established to manage the Sindh ibex, the population in the Dureji area has grown from around 300 to 3,000 animals. When the Sindh ibex began to hold more value other than for just its meat, the local people started taking care of them and their habitat. Where I am hunting, only 12 permits are issued every year, and in the entire country, no more than 24 permits are issued.

Sindh ibex live in the Kirthar mountain range, which consists of a series of parallel rock hill ridges that can get up to 4,000 feet in elevation in the southern part; however, the mountains where I hunted only reached 3,000 feet. These altitudes might not seem like much, but trust me when I tell you, the terrain is much steeper and rugged than you can imagine.

The first morning started with us visiting Sumar, a local shepherd who lives at the base of one of the mountain ranges in a house made of mud bricks with just one bed inside and no door. Overwhelming simplicity — not surprising for a man who spends more time in the mountains than at his house. His local knowledge was crucial, so he offered us a tea over which to discuss the plans for the day.

(First) Sindh ibex are magnificent creatures, and seeing them defying gravity in the cliffs is a unique spectacle.

(Second) Rena, our main local guide, always equipped with a semi-automatic rifle, took care of us in many ways.

(Third) Our local guides surprised me in many ways, always for the good. They were some of the nicest and most helpful people I've ever hunted with.

(Fourth) The simplicity of my guides' equipment, a pair of sandals and a Shalwar kameez (the traditional suit in this part of the world), made me feel self-conscious at times given the modern high-tech clothing I wear.

BY PEDRO AMPUERO

PHOTOS BY SLOTS MEDIA



It didn't take us long to locate some billies, and after arduous negotiations with the guides, we convinced them to allow just Rena (main guide), cameraman Jack, and myself to put a stalk on the animals. The guides were not very used to spotting and stalking with a bow, but they agreed to give it a try our way.

The terrain was very open with no vegetation, but it was broken enough to put on a stalk. The main problem with Sindh ibex is the large groups these animals form. Getting into bow range of the specific billy we spotted from below, when he's surrounded by another 40 animals, seemed impossible. We could only get to within 200 yards before being detected. The wind was constantly changing, and there were too many eyes. Rena didn't speak English, but his facial expression while looking at me with my bow and Jack with his camera clearly said, "I knew this was going to happen."

The temperatures in March are very warm, reaching to 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit) in the middle of the day, so hunting here is better between December and February. The animals that live here need to be tough, but the people who live here need to be even tougher. I always have the self-conscious feeling of being a weak and terrible hunter, as I see myself fully dressed in technical clothing and climbing boots, while being guided by people climbing in sandals and a Shalwar kameez, the traditional outfit in this part of the world.

After the unsuccessful stalk, we climbed to the top of the mountain and sat around a tea to make a plan for the afternoon. Rena and the team had a plan, which Ejaz translated for us. Here, the traditional way they have developed for hunting

ibex has been to ambush them on the highest and steepest parts of the mountain, where the animals tend to go to protect themselves, when some members of the guide team show themselves on the skylines in hopes of moving the animals past the hunter within shooting range. This is how they have hunted these animals for centuries, when they only had guns without scopes and bows and arrows, and a really close shot was mandatory. Despite my not being very keen at all on the plan, mostly because this is a strategy I've been a part of in many other places without success, and it's not the best way to hunt with a bow, I felt it was only fair to give the team an opportunity to see what they could do.

We hiked to the side of a cliff and set ourselves behind a couple of rocks for an ambush. After a half-hour or so, we saw a member of our team, a shepherd, appear on the skyline a kilometer away. The group of ibex started moving slowly, not really pressured, but also not feeling comfortable with the shepherd's presence. While we waited patiently, I could only think how remote our odds of seeing the ibex up close and personal were, as they had hundreds of escape options at their disposal. Perfectly synchronized, a second shepherd appeared on the skyline, and the animals corrected their path a little bit. Before we knew it, the group of ibex was passing by us not more than 50 yards away. Things happened so fast, that we couldn't get an opportunity at any of the big billies, but I have to admit that it was one of the most well-executed ambushes I have ever witnessed in my life. What an unreal experience! The adrenaline rush was something I had never experienced on any other mountain hunt.

Their skill set displayed in preparing ambushes and predicting which trails the animals would take was impressive.

My once-in-a-lifetime, 13-year-old Sindh ibex was simply spectacular.





BRAD NOEL PSE NATION

STEALTH MACH 1

WHEN IN PAKISTAN...

It is a combination of great knowledge of the terrain, and how the mountain ranges are shaped. Mountains here are some kilometers in length, and they are isolated and surrounded by big flats where an ibex will never consider going. For this reason, ibex movement patterns are a bit easier to predict.

The next morning started once again with Rena planning with a shepherd the strategy for the day. Equipped always with a semi-automatic rifle, Rena took care of us in many ways. Pakistan is a country that scares many people, but we felt safe the whole trip.

Reaching the top of the ridge, we walked along searching for ibex. We located a group in one of the valleys and carefully analyzed the situation. There were a couple of really good billies in this group, along with a bunch of females and several small billies, all spread out across the mountain face. Rena suggested we move to a nearby big cliff to prepare another ambush.

We dropped down into a very steep creek surrounded by two big cliffs. Rena pointed to a couple of trails and mentioned that the ibex did not have many other options to get to the cliffs, where they typically go to bed down because there is no way a human can get to them there.

We hid inside a small cave and waited for the ibex to come. After a while, we heard rocks falling around us and a group of ibex started passing by, some of them only a few meters away from the cave! Our hearts were pounding hard, and the adrenaline rush was unreal as we had to protect ourselves from being hit by some of the falling rocks!

We sat tight, waiting for a big billy to show. Soon, Rena,

who had a different angle, told me to draw back because a big billy was about to show up right by us. I got ready, and when the big billy showed up at around 30 yards I drew back, but the ibex started running before I could settle my pin. Almost! I couldn't believe how close I had just come to releasing an arrow at a big Sindh ibex!

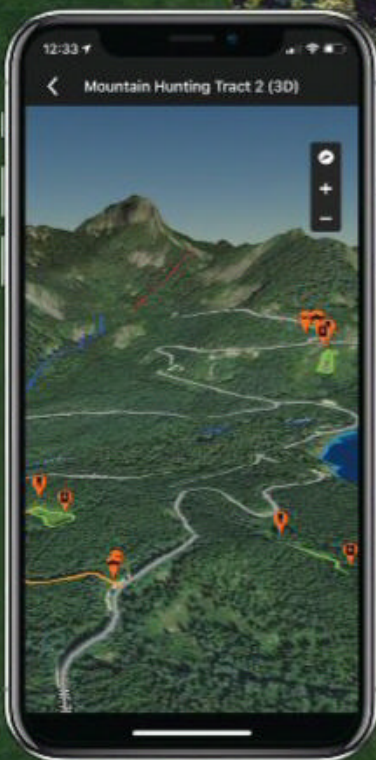
Everything got quiet again, but we waited for a little bit just in case. Just as we started to relax, we heard a sound and saw the horns of two billies on the skyline climbing the cliff in front of us. I ranged a small, flat rock, which was the only place I would be able to get a shot at the ibex, and as the first billy stopped there to look down, my rangefinder read 67 yards. I waited for the second billy to appear, and when it stopped at the same spot as the first for a few seconds, I was already at full draw.

The ibex wasn't completely broadside, but if it took a couple more steps it would disappear, so I took the shot. My arrow disappeared into the air, and the first two steps of the ibex's run confirmed the perfect hit, as the rocks there were now covered in blood.

The ibex disappeared briefly in a crack in the cliff, and a few seconds later we saw the billy rolling down the cliff. With its final kick though, the ibex dropped from the top of the cliff straight down to the bottom, not touching the ground for at least 150 feet! There was silence for a few seconds, and then our entire crew started screaming with excitement!

As soon as the billy hit the ground, Rena ran down the hill with a knife in his hand to practice the "halal." Halal is an Arabic word that translates to "permissible" in English, but it is associated with Islamic dietary laws that define what type of products are permissible to eat. The halal act requires the animal's throat be cut by a sharp knife in a single swipe, and

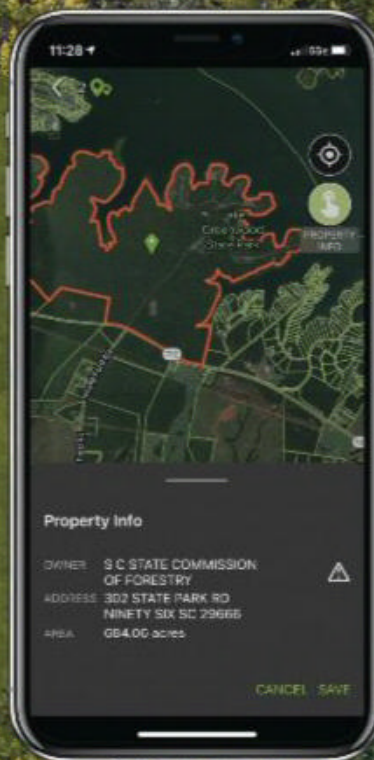
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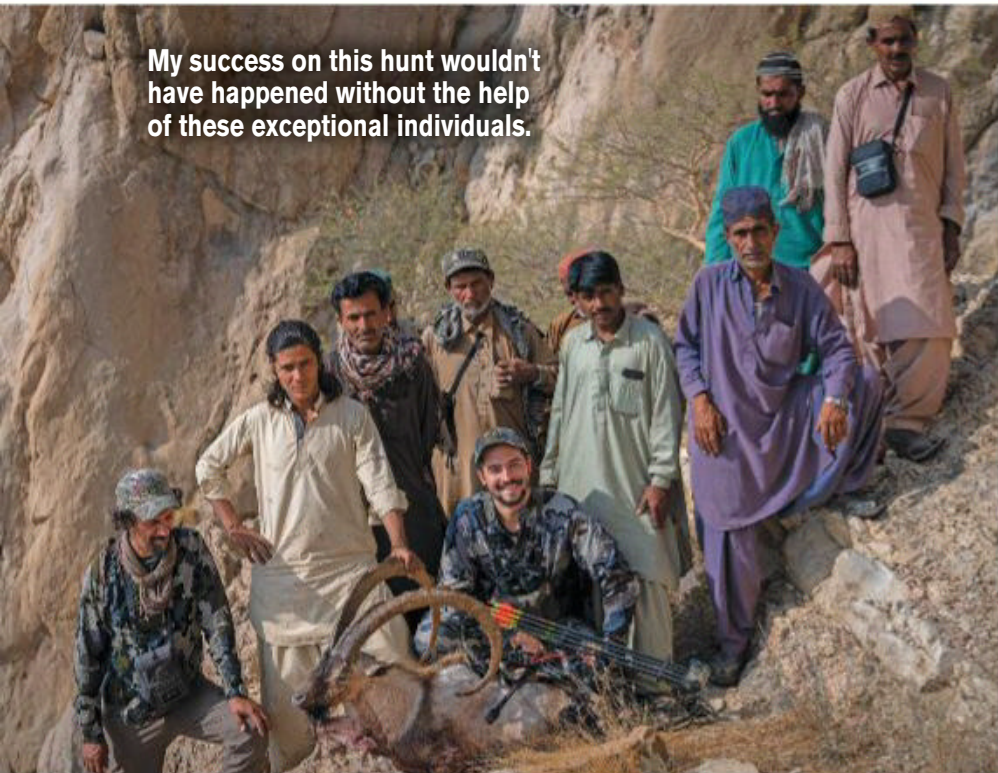


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My success on this hunt wouldn't have happened without the help of these exceptional individuals.



the mountains will look, how the local people will be, or even how they hunt. This trip had been full of surprises. The mountains were higher and tougher than I had expected. The people were lovely, and it was a real pleasure sharing time with them in the mountains. And the way they hunt turned out to be one of the most exciting experiences I have ever had chasing mountain game. I definitely learned the lesson to always be open-minded, in order to allow myself to merge with a different culture and experience new things. That's the soul of adventurous hunting, and the beauty of hunting with different people and cultures.

Arriving home, I opened my dad's hunting diary and photo album from his trip to Pakistan in 1992 and discovered he shot his ibex on the exact same mountain where I shot mine, and that he was also guided by a young Sumar, who was 28 years younger then, which made my hunt even more special. I can only imagine how adventurous my dad was to travel to this place so many years ago, and I hope to keep following in his footsteps and discovering many other corners of this world with a bow in hand. **BH**

blood must be drained out of the carcass. The animal needs to still be alive, and that's why Rena ran downhill quickly in order to practice this technique before the billy fully expired. Once done, the animal is then good to eat. Due to most hunters wanting to mount their trophies, the locals have adapted the technique so damage to the hide is kept to a minimum.

My billy, at around 12 to 13 years of age, was all that I could have hoped for. Although a bit damaged from the fall, he still looked gorgeous to me.

As I traveled home, I reflected on how often I go to places with preconceived ideas and make my mind up about how

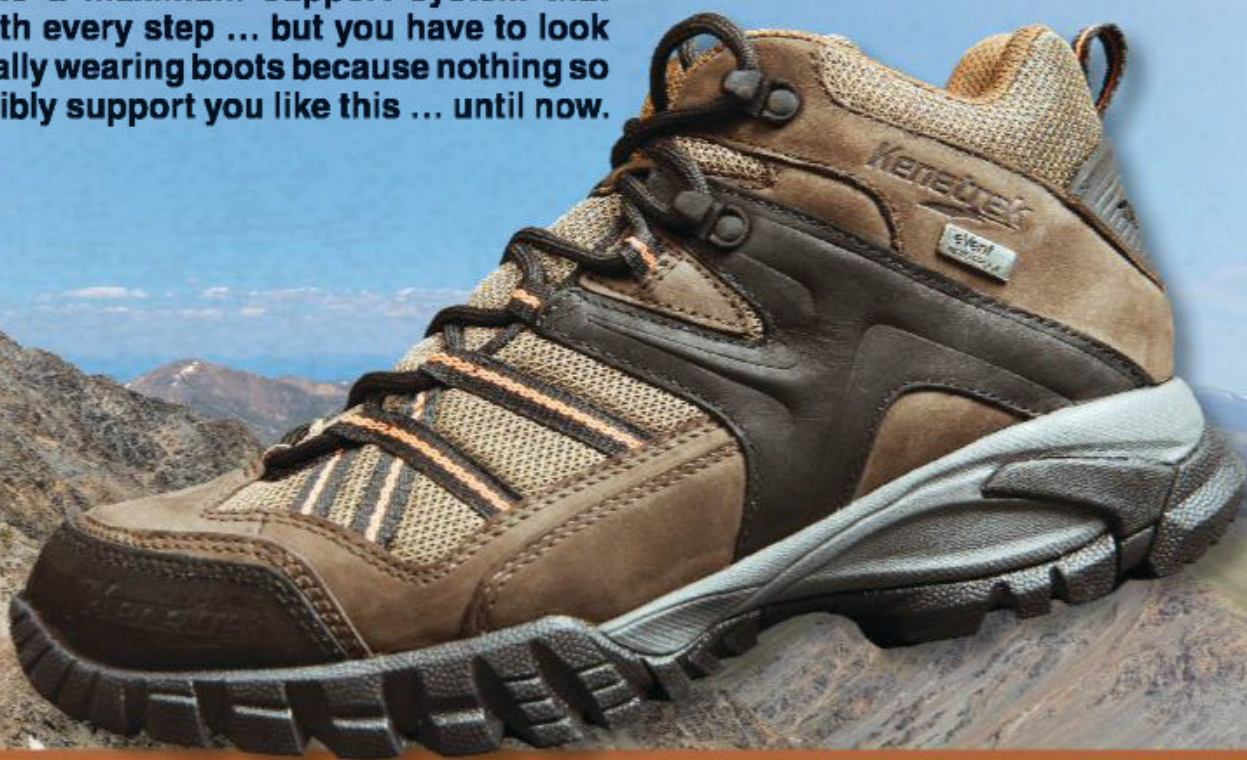
The author lives in Madrid, Spain, where he works as the European Manager of Brand Development for KUIU.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: On this hunt, I used a 70-lb. PSE Expedite bow, Carbon Express RXZ arrows fletched with Bohning Blazer Vanes and tipped with 100-grain Grim Reaper Carni-Four broadheads for a total weight of 385 grains. Other equipment included a Spot Hogg Hogg Father sight, QAD Ultrarest MXT rest, Doinker stabilizer, TightSpot quiver, and a Carter Wise Choice release. Due to the high temperatures, my choice of clothing was the KUIU Tiburon line in Vias Camo, and the KUIU Icon Pro 2300 backpack.

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I'd been in this situation before. Although I found the thrill of surviving a successful 10-day backpack sheep hunt an amazing experience, I also considered it a once-in-a-lifetime event.

After returning from my first sheep hunt back in 2017, I told everyone how much I enjoyed it, but that I would never do it again. The vastness of the Northwest Territories was something I would always remember, but I came back from that hunt with a battered body. I had proven to myself I could do it once. That was enough.

That sentiment bounced around in my head as I hunched over, and curled into a fetal position trying to stay warm and hidden from the most amazing creature I'd ever seen. When the Fannin ram finally stood from his bed to stretch, I came to full draw and thought to myself, *Never say never again!*

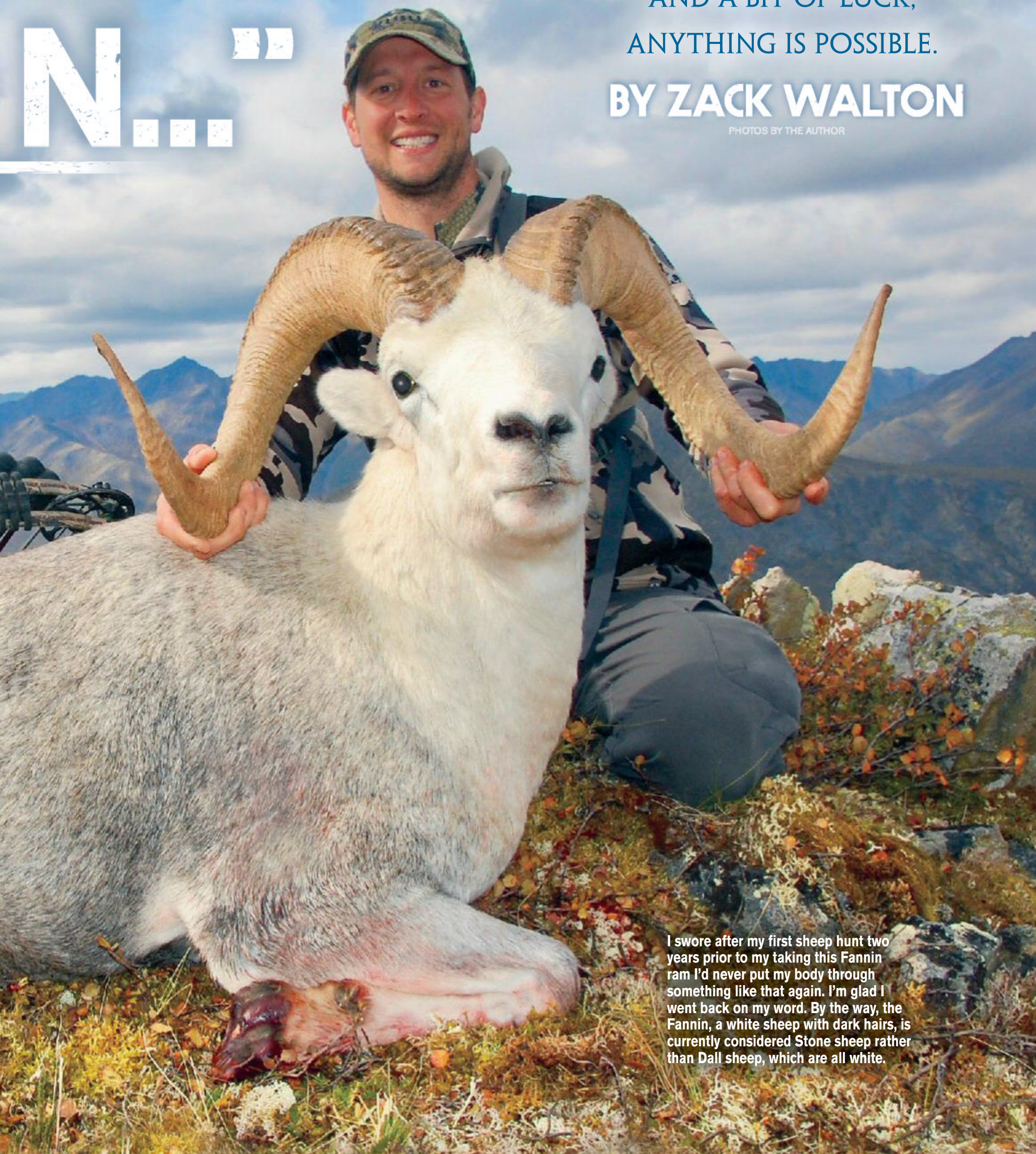
Since childhood, I have had an interest in all the species of North American big game. I would read feature articles in Bowhunter Magazine written by well-traveled bowhunters and be amazed at the diversity of our continent's big game animals. I knew someday I would see and chase most of those critters with a bow and arrow, but I never expected sheep to be one of them. They seemed out of reach — both literally and figuratively.

When I committed to the Dall sheep hunt in the NWT, I expected it to be a one-time thing. I talked to everyone I knew who had hunted sheep, researched all the best gear, and trained hard before the hunt. When it was over, I learned that first-timers can prepare as well as they can, but that they have no idea what to expect, and can never truly be ready for this type of hunt. That was the main reason I didn't plan on going back into sheep country.

I'd been home for several months before I even wanted to listen to someone talk about another sheep hunt. It had taken that long to get all the feeling back in my toes! But if I have a weakness in this world — other than my dogs — it's that I love hunting stories. So, when my buddy Cory told me about his latest trip to the Yukon, I couldn't help but listen. He talked about all the moose and caribou he saw, about the incredible scenery, and about seeing several rams.

N...

WITH HARD WORK,
THE RIGHT ATTITUDE,
AND A BIT OF LUCK,
ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE.
BY ZACK WALTON
PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR



I swore after my first sheep hunt two years prior to my taking this Fannin ram I'd never put my body through something like that again. I'm glad I went back on my word. By the way, the Fannin, a white sheep with dark hairs, is currently considered Stone sheep rather than Dall sheep, which are all white.

NEVER SAY “NEVER AGAIN...”

I'd like to think I showed some resistance, but a month later, Cory and I signed contracts to head to the Yukon for Fan-nin sheep. I guess I lack restraint. Time passed quickly, and before I knew it, I was headed on another sheep hunt.

My previous experience was now an asset, but since this was a different hunt, I still didn't know exactly what to expect. I found that on your second hunt, you tend to overprepare with expectations of everything being exactly the same as your first experience. You focus on improving upon things that didn't go well the first time; things like physical training, gear choices, shooting prowess, and mental attitude. I focused intently on each area of concern from my Dall sheep hunt. When August came, I was ready.

After days of travel and several plane changes, Cory and I made it to base camp. We prepped our gear and were both flown out to our respective spike camps. Cory — the smart one — would be hunting on horseback from a comfortable cabin with a stove and a nice bed. I — not as smart — would be dropped on a riverbed and head up the mountain with my guides Ben and Conor for the next 10 days, to sleep on the ground in a tiny tent. I wouldn't have it any other way!

After the hike in, we set up our first spike camp and had an hour before dark to scout for the following day. We spotted a group of sheep several miles away and quickly devised a plan for the next morning. A nice freeze-dried dinner, a warm sleeping bag, and constant rainfall on the tent made for a good night's sleep.

Our first day was one of my favorite days of hunting. We found dozens of sheep right away, including several rams. The rams were three miles away on top of a far mountain pass, and ewes and lambs were scattered below them. We also glassed a nice grizzly about a mile away. The next 10 hours were filled with lots of excitement — seeing 50 sheep, 10 rams, and spending all day in position above the rams awaiting what would come next.



While my buddy, Cory, was enjoying a comfortable cabin as his spike camp, this was mine. I don't know which of us should have been more jealous!

Unfortunately, what came next was a sow grizzly deciding to climb the mountain and chase every sheep away before we got within bow range. Still, it was an incredible day!

After a day like that, I was pumped about the next week or so of hunting. Then, reality set in, and I was reminded that the most important attributes on a sheep hunt are not sturdy legs and good lungs, but rather a strong mind and a positive attitude. Over the next week, bad weather set in and we couldn't find a ram. For three straight days we never left the tents due to heavy snow and fog. I didn't expect this type of weather in mid-August, so I was wearing every item of clothing I had brought with me and plowed through my only book in no time. To keep spirits up, we found out that Cory had taken a great ram on his second day, and a nice caribou a couple days later. Knowing that my good buddy had been successful made the seemingly endless hours in my tent more tolerable.

It was a welcome sight when the fog lifted, and we could



Who wouldn't smile over this spectacular view. (Inset) This grizzly ultimately spoiled one of my best days of hunting.

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NEVER SAY "NEVER AGAIN..."

Right before dark, on the next to last day of my hunt, we got lucky and spotted this group of rams, one of which was a shooter.

move camp in search of more sheep. After a couple of days, lots of miles, and two mountain passes, we finally found several more rams, but none of them were old enough. Although we had seen a lot of sheep and rams, it was Day Nine, and we had covered lots of rugged ground without turning up a shooter ram since the first day. We had a tough decision to make: Stay put and hope a mature ram appeared in one of the areas we had been scouring for days, or pack up and march to our last-ditch spot for the last day of the hunt. We decided to move. Luck was on our side, and seven miles later — right before dark — we found a group of rams that contained one dark-coated, mature ram.

After deliberation as to whether we should run up the mountain after the

rams and sleep on them to be ready at first light, or camp below and wait until morning to relocate them, we decided to wait and put them to bed in the morning before making our move.

Early the next morning, we quickly found the rams and watched them for several hours before they settled down on the point of a ridge. We picked a route up the mountain, and then made our way as quickly as possible. We had been waiting 10 days for this, so we scaled up the rocks to get above the rams in good time.

As luck would have it, the darkest Fannin (our shooter ram) was bedded 50 yards above the other four sheep. Things were obviously turning our way on the last day of the hunt. To be honest, I felt a little guilty, because it was the easiest stalk I have made in my life. But after being in

the mountains for that long, I was happy to finally have something go smoothly. We were 150 yards above the dark ram, so I dropped back, circled below the ridge, and popped up 60 yards from the bedded sheep. I wiggled closer until my range-finder read 49.9 yards, and then settled in to wait for the bedded ram to stand up.

The hardest part of the entire hunt was keeping my head straight for the shot. We had spent 10 days backpacking in the Yukon wilderness, and this was my first — and only — opportunity at a Fannin ram. Although I tried to convince myself that I could make the shot on the bedded ram, I forced myself to wait.

I had dropped my pack earlier and worn minimal clothing to sneak in on the ram, so when the storm clouds blew over



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NEVER SAY "NEVER AGAIN..."

It was only fitting that we had to endure whiteout conditions during our pack out.



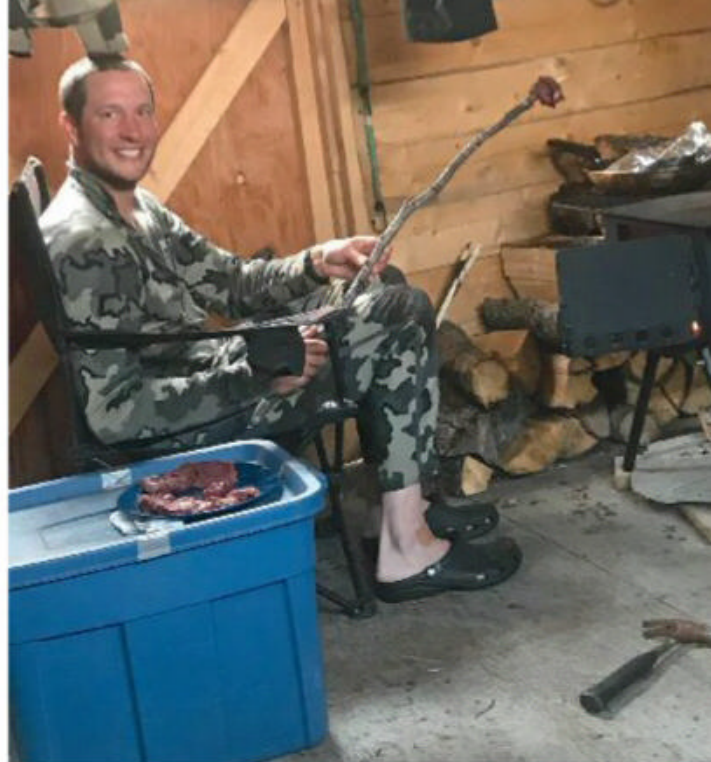
with drizzling rain and cold winds, I was willing the ram to stand and give me an opportunity, as I shook from chills and anticipation. About an hour later, the ram rocked in his bed. I was at full draw before he was on all fours. When he turned broadside and began to stretch, I knew it was only a few more seconds before my

arrow would hit home. It was over very quickly, and I watched the most beautiful animal I had ever seen fall in seconds.

After a week of nasty weather and tough hunting, I felt like the hunting gods really gave us a break for this opportunity. And to make it even better, the clouds moved away and allowed the sun to shine while we took care of the ram. It wasn't until we loaded our packs and started down the mountain that a white-out blizzard began, making our journey back to camp a little more exciting.

That evening, we arrived at a cabin — an extremely welcome sight — and we ate one of the best meals of my life. Both tenderloins, one backstrap, and both racks of ribs were completely gone by the time we finished. We sat fat and happy as the sun set over the river, reliving the past 10 days and sharing photos we had taken.

After two 10-day backpack sheep hunts, and two last-day rams, I know exactly what can happen when preparation, hard work, a positive attitude, a little luck, and being able to capitalize on an opportunity come together. To take a Fannin of this color is something for which I will always be grateful. After my last sheep hunt, I said multiple times,






If I look fat and happy in this photo while cooking loins, backstraps, and ribs from my ram, it's because I was.

"Never again!" Obviously, I was lying. This time, I am being more careful with my words.

The author lives in Rocklin, California, with his wife, Anne.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: On this hunt, my equipment of choice was a Hoyt Defiant 34 bow, Gold Tip Pro Hunter arrows, G5 Montec CS broadheads, Spot Hogg sight, KUIU clothing, and a Kifaru pack.





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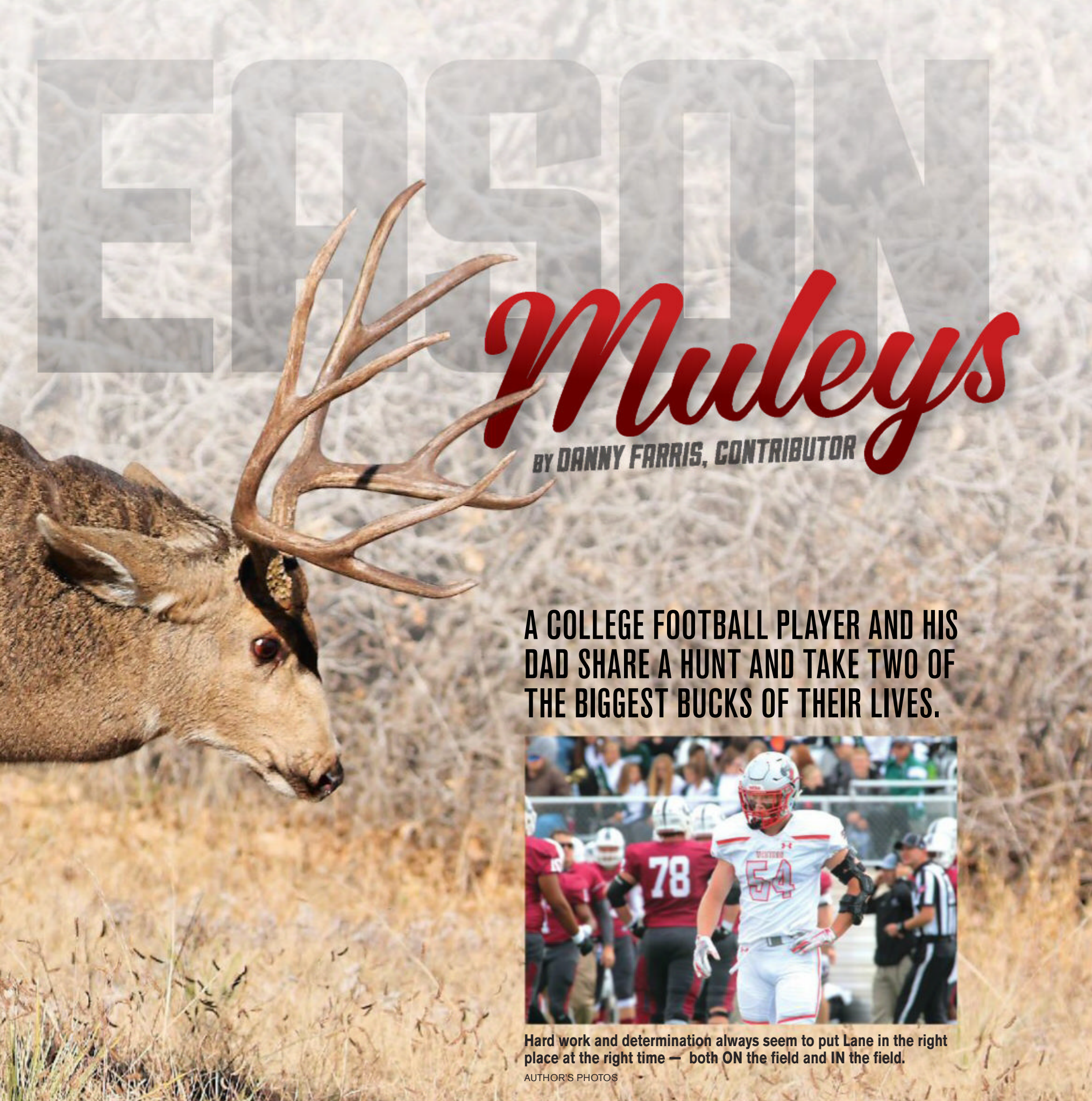
Optics are an open-country mule deer bowhunter's best friend. The trick to using them is learning to look for ants instead of elephants. Searching for large, grey bodies seldom yields results. More often than not, bucks are given away by small details that look a little out of place, like a white spot that turns out to be a rump or throat patch. The buck we were watching was given away by glare off an antler as he disappeared into a tangle. It had been a quick, distant glance, but I saw enough to know I wanted another look.

I was hunting the Eastern Plains of Colorado with my son, Lane, and for an hour or so we waited patiently, but only a couple of does emerged from the tangle. We knew the buck was still in there, but Lane didn't have much time to hunt, so we needed to try to find one elsewhere.

The good news was it was the peak of the mule deer rut, when anything can happen! Two days prior, Lane had spotted a buck he was anxious to relocate. It was a narrow-framed buck with tremendous tine length. I wasn't as impressed

with him as Lane was, but he was convinced I'd misjudged him. Like most bowhunters, my dreams are haunted by stereotypically wide-framed muleys. That can lead to a tendency to underestimate bucks that lack spread. It really didn't matter, though. The buck was just off the property we had permission to hunt, and now he was nowhere to be found. I didn't mind. I was just happy to be hunting with my son.

I'm proud to say Lane is one of four young bowhunters I've raised, but without a doubt, he's the one most smitten



Muleys

BY DANNY FARRIS, CONTRIBUTOR

A COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYER AND HIS DAD SHARE A HUNT AND TAKE TWO OF THE BIGGEST BUCKS OF THEIR LIVES.



Hard work and determination always seem to put Lane in the right place at the right time — both ON the field and IN the field.

AUTHOR'S PHOTOS

with it. When a kid insists on including his Hoyt bow in his senior pictures, you know he's got it bad. The problem is, bowhunting isn't his only true love. He has two — bowhunting and football — and those two passions don't easily mix.

As a linebacker for Western Colorado University, Lane has enjoyed a decorated collegiate career and will return for his senior season this fall as the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference's current career leader in tackles. Although undersized, hard work and determination always seem to put Lane in the right

place at the right time. Funny how the same can be said of just about every successful bowhunter I know.

Football season runs from early August through mid-November, eliminating Lane's ability to participate in most Colorado resident archery seasons, and making it difficult for me to plan hunts and still make it to his games. Fortunately, the Eastern Plains archery deer season runs late in the year, and so long as we draw tags, I get a chance to hunt with Lane, and he gets a chance to scratch his bowhunting itch.

As the prime evening hour arrived, we returned to where the buck had vanished into the tangle. With no sign of deer there, we gambled that they'd be moving toward a feeding area farther down the creek. We arrived to find does moving up the creekbed, and when he stepped out behind them, I nearly dropped my binoculars! This buck was a monster! Wide, long, heavy — he had it all. Before I could get a word out of my mouth, Lane belted, "That's a massive buck!" They were about a quarter-mile away in the bottom of the creekbed, so



On his first Eastern Plains outing, Lane begged me to shoot this 1½-year-old buck. At the time, I thought it was a mistake. But looking back, I'm certain it was an experience that helped spark his passion for bowhunting.

Lane moved quickly to close the gap while I watched from a distance.

Just as he was beginning to crest the bank overlooking the creekbed, Lane spotted a set of doe ears fixed on his position. She'd obviously heard something but never got a good look at him. When Lane raised his bow-mounted decoy, she just stood there at 30 yards, staring at what she perceived was a buck looking over the hill at her. The rest of the does looked up, too, but they didn't spook.

Amazingly, the rut-crazed buck never even glanced at him. His nose remained buried in a doe's back end right up until Lane's arrow pierced his lungs!

Stalking mule deer during the rut presents a unique set of challenges. Whitetail bucks typically chase a doe out into an isolated spot, and then dog her relentlessly until she finally submits. Once she does, they keep her in lockdown, away from all distractions, breeding her multiple times over a 24 to 48-hour period. Muleys, on the other hand, don't typically attempt to chase does away from the group. Hot mule deer does usually stay right with the herd throughout the entire breeding process.

Editor Curt Wells wrote after a rut hunt he and I once shared, "During the early season, a lone, mature buck is a gift. During the rut, it's a miracle." While seeing young bucks by themselves during the rut is fairly common, it's rare to see mature bucks alone. When you do, it usually means one of two things: He ran out of hot does to breed, or he got run off by another mature buck. Either way, unless he's injured, he'll be covering ground fast in search of new does. In my experience, this is a golden opportunity, but you have to act quickly.

If the buck is in a well-defined travel corridor, you can try to get ahead of him for an ambush, but my favorite method by far is to show him a doe decoy. Now, everyone knows I'm a decoy junkie, but it's for good reason. Whether you prefer a bow-mounted decoy like the Stalker

from Ultimate Predator or a Heads Up, or even a handheld Montana Decoy — if you can get the wind right and get in front of the buck undetected, and flash a doe decoy at him, get ready to draw because he's going to come! Just make sure to use common sense with your decoy.

First off, try to hide your lower body. If you shoot from your knees, it takes little cover. Second, don't just stand there like a statue. Reach up and flick an ear, or if you're far enough away, lower the decoy like the doe is putting her head down to feed. Quick flashes of a doe that's there one second and gone the next can put a buck into don't-let-her-get-away mode, and that's when things get really exciting!

But like Curt alluded to, when it comes to mature bucks, that scenario is an exception to the rule. Most times, to complete a successful stalk on a mature muley during the rut, you have to contend with several sets of savvy doe eyes, and that can be tough in open terrain. Yes, sometimes the stars align and present you with enough topography to slip within bow range. But in open country, you frequently run out of cover.

Once again, I prefer to have a decoy at the ready, but in this situation, I like to use a buck. The reasons are simple. First, if you run out of cover, you have something to try instead of just giving up. If you have plenty of time and are confident you can find the same buck again, backing out to stalk another day could be the right move. This is seldom the case for me, and during the rut there's no guarantee that buck will even be in the same county the next day, so why not try? Second, just like it did for Lane, a decoy buys you time. Sometimes, even an extra second or two can mean the difference between putting a giant on the ground or eating tag soup.



Lane's stalk on this buck was tricky, because he was literally surrounded by does. But a Stalker Decoy bought him time, keeping them calm long enough for Lane to execute a perfect shot on his biggest muley to date!

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POSTSEASON MULEYS

Finally, the reason I almost always use a buck decoy is when a buck already has a hot doe, he doesn't care one bit about other does. The only thing that will typically get his attention is another buck that's invading his space.

With his biggest muley to date on the ground, Lane had to head back to school, so now it was my turn. Almost a week had passed by the time I found the narrow buck Lane thought I had underestimated. Once I got a second, closer look, I knew this buck was far better than I had first thought. The only problem was, he was five miles as the crow flies from where I had permission to hunt, so I wrote him off. That was on November 30, at 4:09 p.m. I know, because I used my Phone Skope to shoot some long-distance video of the buck.

Here's where the story takes a crazy turn. The very next morning, December 1, just 15 hours later, I found the buck on my hunting ground following three does around like a lost puppy! I couldn't believe it. Considering the fact that he had just covered five miles overnight, there was no time to lose.

After landmarking where he and the



does bedded down, I attached a Stalker Buck Decoy to my bow and donned a head-mounted action camera to capture the stalk. They were bedded in a good spot with a large bank overlooking their position. I covered ground quickly on the initial approach, and made sure to perfectly align all of my landmarks before cresting the bank overlooking their beds.

Slowly peeking over the hill, I could plainly see the bush the buck had bedded next to and ranged it at 60 yards, but he wasn't there! Anxiety set in as I inched forward behind the decoy, scanning for antlers, when suddenly I could feel his stare. There he was, lying in a new bed, and looking right at me. When he stood

up, my anxiousness shifted into full panic. I drew in full sight of him and was attempting to settle my bouncing 60-yard pin on his vitals, when it dawned on me that he was looking at a buck, not me! He's not going anywhere, I told myself, and with that, I slowly let down to collect my nerves and see how he was going to react. It was a good decision!

After watching me crest the hill, and then draw and let down in plain sight, the buck glanced over toward his does, then back up the hill at me and pinned his ears back. Bingo! On he came in my direction. When he stopped again at 35 yards to posture and lick his lips, I drew again, but this time settled, triggered the

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POSTSEASON MULEYS



(Left) This deep-forked Eastern Colorado buck is my most unique muley to date. Letting down to give my bow-mounted decoy a chance to do its job was definitely the decision that sealed his fate.

(Below) I was able to self-film my stalk from start to finish using an action cam mounted on my head. The video is available on the Ultimate Predator Gear YouTube channel. Here you can see the buck approaching me behind my Stalker Buck Decoy.



release, and sent a Rage Trypan through his heart!

When I walked up on the buck, I knew Lane was right — I'd grossly underestimated him. This narrow, deep-forked buck was definitely the most unique muley I'd ever taken, and this was by far the best mule deer season ever for the Farris household. Lane's buck gross-scored 190% inches, while my nar-

row buck shocked everyone, stretching the tape at 200% inches gross!

Based on the title of this article, some of you may have thought you were going to be reading about some nefarious act. But "Postseason Muleys" refers to the post *football* season hunt Lane and I shared. This one is going to be really hard to beat. But you can bet we'll give it our best shot. **BK**

AUTHORS NOTES: My equipment included a Hoyt RX-3 bow, Gold Tip Velocity Valkyrie XT arrows, Rage Trypan broadheads, Spot Hogg Father sight, SIG SAUER optics, Browning Wasatch apparel, Kenetrek boots, and a bow-mounted Stalker Decoy from Ultimate Predator. Lane used a Hoyt Carbon Spyder bow, Gold Tip Velocity Pro arrows, Spot Hogg Tommy Hogg sight, Rage Hypodermic broadheads, Browning Speed apparel, Kenetrek boots, and a bow-mounted Stalker Decoy as well.

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OCTOBER

MY VIGILANCE broke under the distraction of quaking leaves tinted in a chroma of amber light. Fractals and flutters moved in rapture as the combination of late-day October sun and a chilly northwest wind expressed the onset of fall's embrace. The contrasting fluid movement of an advancing brown silhouette broke the visual cadence — snapping me back to reality.

Just moments before, I watched as a young buck thrust and thrashed a nearby licking branch, pawing the ground with incredible might while asserting his presence in the area. With this scene on the top of my mind, I couldn't help but presume the deer striding in my direction was him. A screen of foliage concealed a full visual of his body and rack. Moving across the broken flag of sticks and leaves, I finally got a glimpse of the buck's trophy-sized antlers as they contrasted against a backdrop of deep-green cornstalks. It sent me to my feet in preparation for an impending shot. Clearly, this was not the same deer.

Slowing his tempo, the buck nipped and browsed along a narrow break that separated the skin-

Is The Perfect Month

ny strip of timber in which I was perched and the edge of a large cornfield. To my surprise, the buck diverged from his linear path into the timber strip and selectively picked at browse and a fresh crop of acorns. As he closed the distance, I came to full draw and settled my aim on his broadside form. The arrow went, and as if in slow motion, I watched as a cardinal ribbon erupted from his side, landing on the ground and disrupting the contoured lines created by the tapestry of yellow and orange leaves blanketing the forest floor. As he ran out of sight, I listened intently for the ensuing crash. It was October 18, and I had just arrowed a mature buck for the fifth straight year, well before the calendar flipped to November.

Less than an hour later, I followed a wide spoor of carmine beads glistening under the bright light of my headlamp's beam. Coming upon the fallen dark-antlered buck in just 75 yards, I knelt in the cool evening air to both pay my respects to the fallen beast, and to





PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

BY TIMOTHY G. KENT

**NOVEMBER GETS ALL THE
ACCOLADES, BUT IN MY
OPINION, OCTOBER IS
A SAFER BET FOR
CONSISTENT
SUCCESS.**

OCTOBER IS THE PERFECT MONTH

marvel at another consummation of October success. As I gripped his nine-point rack, I was reminded of words frequently penned by my now late friend, Craig Dougherty: "The rut can either make you a hero, or a zero."

Many bowhunters still overlook the virtues that October presents to fill a tag in lieu of the intense movement and high-paced chase periods November delivers. I've always found November great for regularly seeing shooter bucks foot-loose and free-moving at all hours of the day, but struggled to perennially punch a tag. Conventional thinking embraces the notion that November presents the zenith of the season's opportunity. Although this may be the case in some instances, there's a long list of reasons October is the perfect month for consistently killing big bucks.

October presents long days — especially earlier in the month. Because of this, opportunities to get into the field have the potential to be increased, giving hardcore hunters more time than just weekend outings. If you live or work close enough to the ground you hunt, it's not unrealistic to get into the woods after



The vibrant colors of October are yet another reason why I love hunting whitetails during this special month.

work during the week. This time of year, bucks tend to move closer to darkness, providing a greater buffer that allows you to arrive at your chosen hunting spot with enough time to settle in and let the woods calm down. My aim is to be in my stand or blind for the last 90 minutes of daylight this time of year, for as many days as my schedule will allow. If time still remains an issue and you work a nine-to-five job, try to forego a traditional lunch hour, or find other ways to

leave work earlier to realize more stand time. This may mean starting earlier in the morning, or shifting your schedule in an effort to grab an extra hour at the end of the day. The more days you can stack in the field this time of year, the more opportunity and information you'll have to help you find success. It's a lot easier to pull this off in October than once the calendar turns to triple ones. Investing time in October can also save precious vacation days to use on other



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hunting opportunities throughout the year, or to bone up on family time.

We've often heard that bucks will maintain their summer rituals in the early parts of the month until they're disrupted by the "October Lull." Information presented by the QDMA in 2016 suggests such restrictions in movement do not exist, and that it's more commonly a change or shift in food sources and how the deer are utilizing core areas rather than the actual activity itself. Finding the right areas through this transition can be one of the greater challenges, especially as bachelor groups of bucks break apart and become less visible in open terrain. However, in lieu of this, those who find success tend to take an aggressive approach to their October hunting tactics in an effort to make the most of the predictability the month presents.

Visual data is a critical component to success this time of year. Between scouting cameras that act as your eyes and ears when you're not in a certain location and your own observation data, October is an ideal time to use that information and make dramatic moves to find success. If a buck appears in an area once in



I've managed to do this on mature bucks five straight October's now.

October, there's a very high likelihood he'll do it again, but you have to act fast to catch him in the pattern. Don't wait a week; move in the next time the wind is right, and don't wait for him to come to you. I wasted years hoping a buck would eventually walk by me. These days, I go to them. If I have a single sighting of a shooter buck in an area, I will keep strategically working that area until I either have an opportunity to kill him, or I feel absolutely certain he's on a different pattern. Sometimes this means hanging back and watching through glass if the wind is wrong — either from an observation stand or from your vehicle, if the area allows. If it's a spot where you have the ability to sit stands or blinds for different winds, don't be afraid to hang in there and keep picking your way in.

There's a good chance your paths will eventually cross and you'll get a shot.

Early season food sources can be some of the most consistently hit all year. Early dropping oak varieties, apples, green browse, persimmons, pears, or plots of clover, alfalfa, or beets are all favored by whitetails during the warmer October days. If you hunt in an area that has agriculture, it's a good idea to look at corn as cover rather than food while avoiding beans, unless you have consistent visual data to suggest deer are eating them on a regular basis. I have a friend who consistently arrows good bucks during early October under a cluster of apple trees. He waits for the right wind, heads in, and so long as he doesn't disrupt the bucks' patterns, he keeps hitting that location until a big buck shows up.

Because you may be hunting more open areas this time of year, it's important to take your entrance and exit routes into consideration. The last thing you want to be doing is blowing a group of deer off an oak flat, ag field, or other food source every time you're coming or going from a stand. Over time, I have come to believe this is one of the greatest contributing factors to a change in deer behavior and their use of an area. If you

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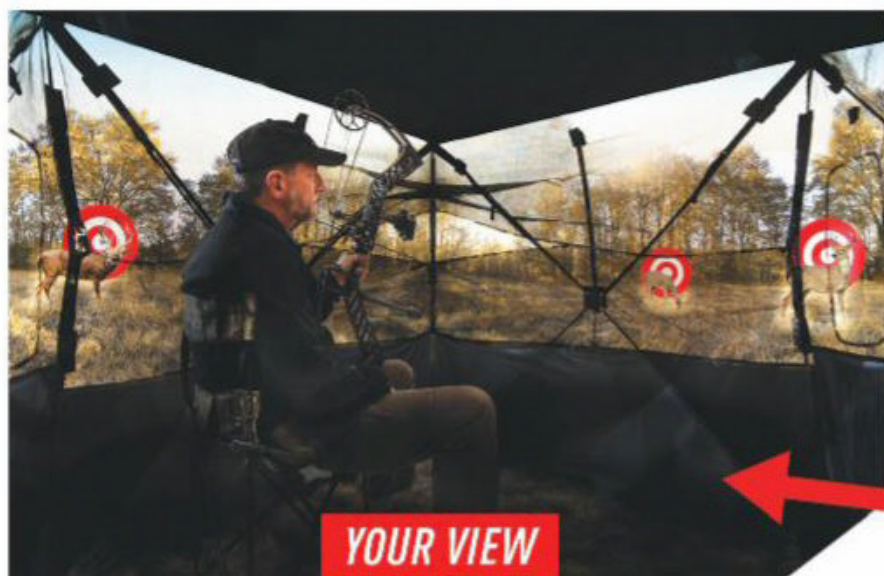
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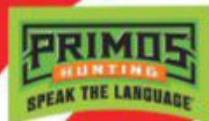
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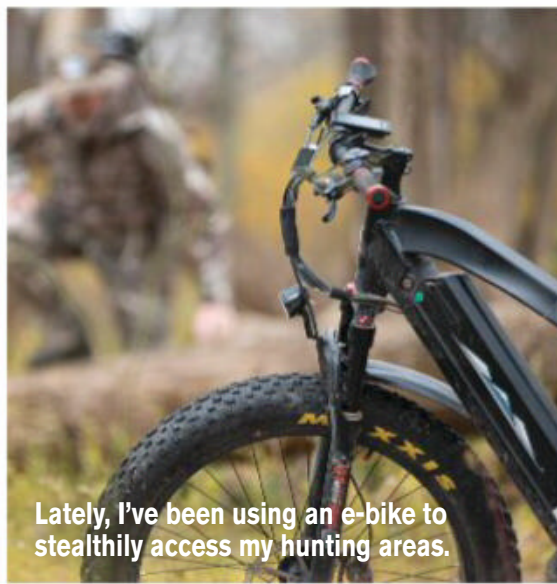


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can't get in and out relatively undetected, you're better off waiting for the one day that presents the absolute best possible scenario, and then make the most of that one hunt. If possible, it can be helpful to have a friend, relative, or hunting partner drive in and pick you up in a vehicle or ATV. In recent years, I have started using an e-bike to enter and exit the zones that hold my stands and blinds, which the deer don't seem to relate to human presence. It has been a true game-changer.

Although much of the previously mentioned advantages to finding success in October revolves around consistency, another enormous advantage is an inconsistent weather pattern that can bring dramatic changes in temperature or other conditions as a front comes and goes. Generally, as a weather front moves in and the barometric pressure drops, being a slave to their stomach, deer will feed heavily on desired food sources, making them susceptible to your advances. The same holds true after a strong weather front passes, especially when giving way to clear, high-pressure days after strong rains or a significant drop in daily ambient temperature.



Lately, I've been using an e-bike to stealthily access my hunting areas.

These have become some of my favorite days to hunt, and I will work diligently to arrange my work and family schedules to take advantage of them based upon the long-term weather forecasts. Although this type of tactic will work during any portion of the hunting season, I find that fronts that come in the first half of October provide the most reliable results, especially when deer are working a food source that's easily identifiable that time of year. This may be a short window of just a couple days, but if your favorite weather or hunting app is showing a big swing in temps in October, it's time to make arrangements to be in the woods.

October can mean late nights, long days, and many dinners alone, but the work and time can be worth it when your hands wrap around a larger-than-average set of antlers. The key is to make your best effort to find balance among all the aspects of your life, while maximizing opportunities to spend time in the field. One of the easiest things you can do is just show up and believe that the possibility exists. All too often, bowhunters take to the field with diminished hope that exciting opportunities can even be presented in a month analogous with a weakened sense of opportunity. However, speaking from firsthand experience, October is fraught with exciting opportunities at big bucks and has proven to be anything but a lull. **BH**

The author is a real estate agent and business and branding consultant who lives with his wife and two daughters in the Finger Lakes region of New York.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: My equipment on this hunt included a Mathews Traverse bow, Carbon Express Maxima Red SD arrows with Nocktural FIT lighted nocks, Rage Hypodermic NC broadheads, IQ Pro 1 sight, QAD Ultrarest, TruFire Synapse release, Sitka Gear clothing, and a Bakcou eBike.



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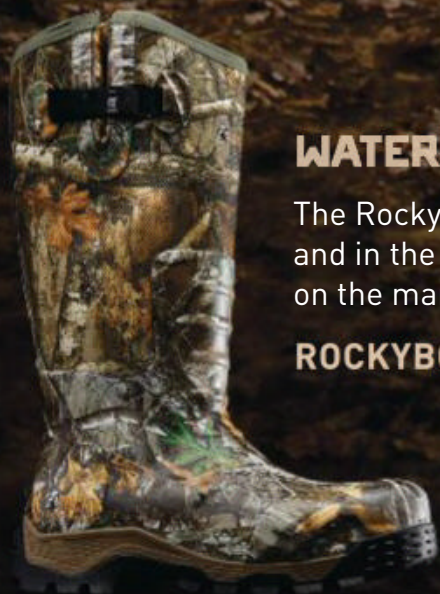
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PICKET FENCE

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN THE ODDS OF SUCCESS ARE INCREDIBLY LOW? YOU TRY ANYWAY!



BY RON NIZIOLEK, CONTRIBUTOR

SEPTEMBER 20, 2019, I raised my head inches at a time to peer over the small rise. Busted. The bull was staring right at me from only 35 yards. An arrow on the string, I waited, hunched over, snow pelting my face with rivulets of water running down my neck. Stalemate. After a minute-long stare down, he bolted. I stepped forward and came to full draw thinking, *Holy crap, that's a lot of elk!* The bull and 47 cows were trotting perpendicular to me. I cow-called loudly, and the bull looked and slowed to a stop. I figured there was no way I could shoot with that many cows surrounding him, but as he stopped, so did the cows behind him. The ones covering him up moved ahead. Like Moses parting the Red Sea, there was a 10-foot gap on either side of him as I settled in and broke the shot. On impact, the herd stampeded over a rise and into the storm. I followed on a run, wanting to get a visual on the bull if he made it to the timber.

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PICKET FENCE

The story of this bull began in 2018, when we first laid eyes on him. Visuals were brief, and we could never determine exactly how many points he had. We knew it was seven or eight to a side, and we named him "Picket Fence." Midway through the season, I intercepted his herd feeding into a small pocket high in the rimrocks. I let his cows feed past, waiting for him and praying the wind would hold. When he showed, I had him dead to rights but screwed it up. My arrow smacked him squarely in the shoulder, and as he bolted, fell out intact with the broadhead. I wanted to puke!

I blood-trailed him for a few hundred yards before losing the trail. I tracked the herd in the soft alpine terrain and found his cows above timberline with only a satellite bull. Hope briefly returned that I might find Picket dead. That hope was interrupted by a bugle down the valley. I peered intently through my binoculars, and was shocked to see Picket Fence in an all-out battle with another herd bull. After soundly trouncing his rival, Picket pushed his new bunch of cows up another ridge with barely a limp. I gave chase, but the closest I got that evening was 90 yards. He seemed unfazed from his injury, which only reinforced how incredibly tough these animals are. Throughout the rest of the month, I had a few more close calls with Picket. But with the season coming to a close, I finally killed a different bull on September 28.

Memories of Picket Fence haunted me through the winter and summer months, and I was anxious to look for him come September. We set up elk camp on September 6, and my nephew, Sam, and I spotted him on the morning

of September 7 — my birthday. We tried hard but couldn't close the deal, and with only two days to hunt, Sam shot a spike right before dark. While packing out the remainder of his spike the next morning, we again spotted Picket Fence, but we set up in the wrong location and I missed my chance. That's how my luck went for the next couple of weeks.

On September 20, after a night of rain pounding on the camper with no letup in sight, I decided to rest my back, sleep in, and take a break. About 10 a.m., Randy Giesey and son-in-law, Zack, returned to camp. After a late breakfast, we crammed into my truck and headed up the mountain. The rain turned to snow, and there wasn't much hope for doing any glassing. We met up with other campmates, Adam and Mary Miles, and Adam's dad, Brad. They said they'd just glassed a bull they were pretty sure was Picket Fence, high on the mountain during a brief break in the storm. By the time we got to where they'd glassed from, the mountain was socked in again.

They described the meadow where he was lying with 47 cows. I knew the mountain well, and they assured me none of them felt like chancing the weather and the many sets of eyes. I knew this wasn't really the case, since all of them are hardcore hunters. They knew my history with Picket and wanted me to be the one to try for him. It didn't take any convincing for me. I was out of the truck and suiting up for the killer hike. I told the guys I would be hiking out in a different location, but it wouldn't be for at least three hours. My last words to them were, "You realize there is only like a five-percent chance of this working."

Off I hustled into the storm, on what everyone figured was a futile mission.



With dry clothes and packs on, my buddies and I left our pickup trucks to begin the long trek to where my bull lay dead.

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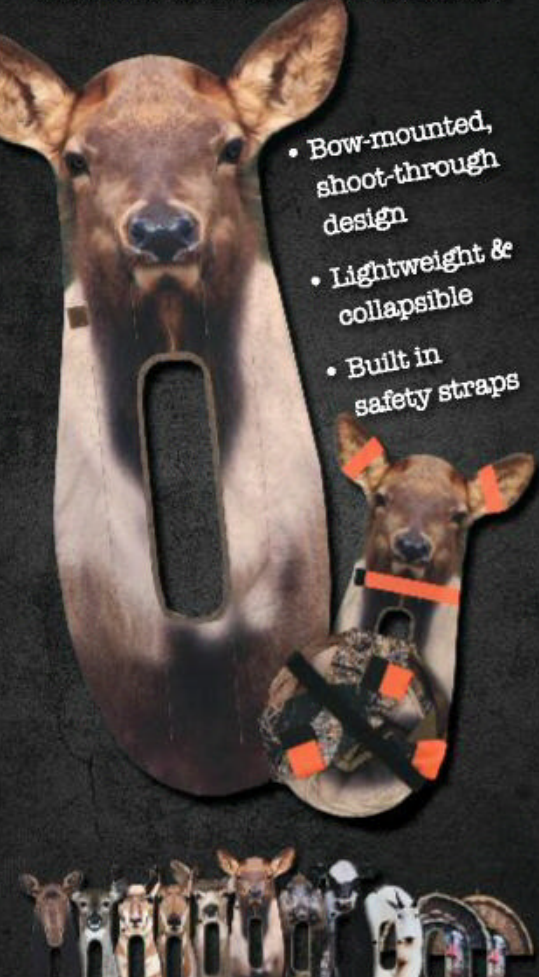
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PICKET FENCE

There were several creek crossings and dense forest to go through on the way. I quickly realized that I'd put on a wind-breaker and not a rain jacket. My two shirts underneath quickly became wet, and climbing the mountain was the only way to stay warm. A strong west wind blew, but I knew where the elk were located at the base of some cliffs, the wind would reverse course. As I approached, the wind did switch, and I kept up my effort to stay below a line where I imagined the elk to be. The effort wasn't enough. One cow was low and got my wind. She stood and caught me in an opening 300 yards away.

It was snowing hard and I stayed motionless for 15 minutes, avoiding detection. During that time, most of the other elk gathered with her, peering over the edge to see what she was looking at. Not seeing anything, they eventually milled off uphill. I took advantage and ran to the next group of trees. I worked along the tree edge, closer and uphill in their direction. I spotted the snow-covered backs of some cows only 60 yards downhill, and quickly dropped back around for the wind. Then I stalked closer, arrow nocked.

This brings us back to the beginning of the story. As I sprinted across the meadow, the cows hooked below me and came into view, watching their back trail. Interpreting that as a very positive sign, I ran another 30 yards and spotted Picket on his side, with antlers upside down and stuck in the ground in a

blanket of snow, already turning white. I knelt briefly with him, wrestling his antlers from the ground and brushing dirt and snow from them. It was a powerful moment, and I was shaking with excitement as much as from the cold. I knew I needed to get out quickly, find some dry clothes, and get some help as well.

More than an hour later, I stumbled to the road just as Randy and Zack were coming by. As Randy exited the truck and asked how it went, I tried my best to look dejected. I was covered in snow and so was my bow, helping to hide the missing arrow. I said, "I'm freezing!" I couldn't help smiling then, and said, "You know that five-percent chance I mentioned? I'll take it every time!"

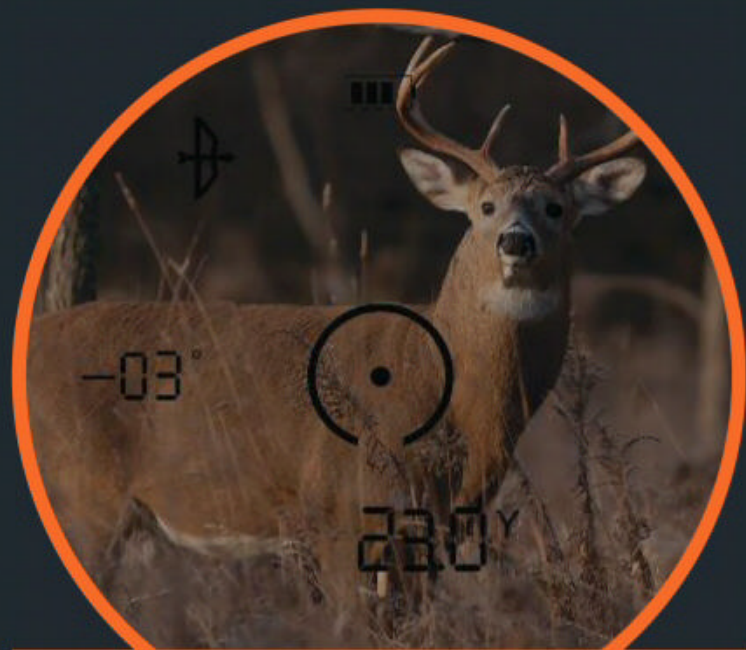
I tried giving Randy a frozen-hand high-five, but he bear-hugged me clear off the ground. He kept saying, "I told them you'd get him." A good hunting buddy like that is always happy for you, even when they know the work that lies ahead.

When we got to camp, the others were napping in warm sleeping bags. I woke them up and told them to grab their packs. While everyone was getting ready, I changed into dry clothes and fresh boots. The snow was really picking up, and I was anxious to get back to the bull. I hoped the grizzly bears were in the thick timber sleeping through the storm, and not out prowling for food.

Our packs were loaded with essentials, and with everyone suited up for the storm, we began the long trek back up the mountain. During each of our breaks while climbing, I relayed more of the story.

In nasty conditions like these, it takes special friends to share in the celebration and work. Pictured left to right are Randy Giese, Brad Miles, Mary Miles, me, and Adam Miles.





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Everyone was amazed that I'd pulled it off with so many watchful eyes. I repeated that it was just luck, but I guess that luck never would have happened had I not put forth the effort. If nothing else, I am persistent!

We broke out into the meadow where Picket lay dead with six more inches of snow covering him. The photo session was difficult, as camera lenses had to constantly be wiped off. As soon as the photos were done, we quickly got to work breaking Picket down for the long pack out. Even with the heavy snow, a watch was kept for grizzlies. Once we were done and packs were loaded, a brief pause in the storm allowed for a few good photos with Picket on my back.

Everyone set their own pace down the steep, slippery mountain and through heavy deadfall. Even with the harsh conditions and the physical exertion, there were lots of smiles when we finally made it to the trucks. Randy, Zack, Brad Miles, and Adam and Mary Miles all contributed so much to this memorable day, and I can't begin to thank them enough. My two-year effort for Picket Fence was a mix of highs and lows, close calls and blown opportunities, and finally success. With each meal of elk steaks, and each glance at the antlers, I'm reminded of that snowy day high in the mountains. Five-percent odds? I'm going every time!

The author is an accomplished bowhunter and writer, who lives in Cody, WY, with his wife, Carol.

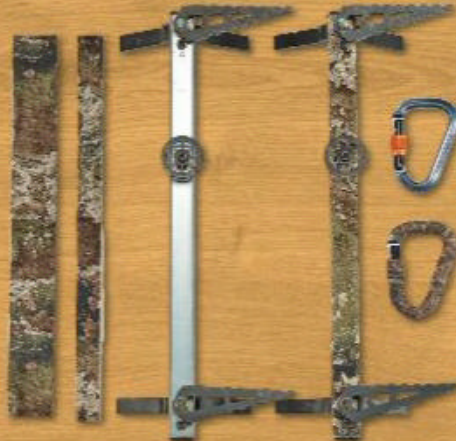
AUTHOR'S NOTE: On this hunt I used a Hoyt Carbon RX-3, Easton FMJ arrows, G5 Striker V2 broadheads, Option sight, Zeiss binoculars, TightSpot quiver, and Schnee's Beartooth boots.

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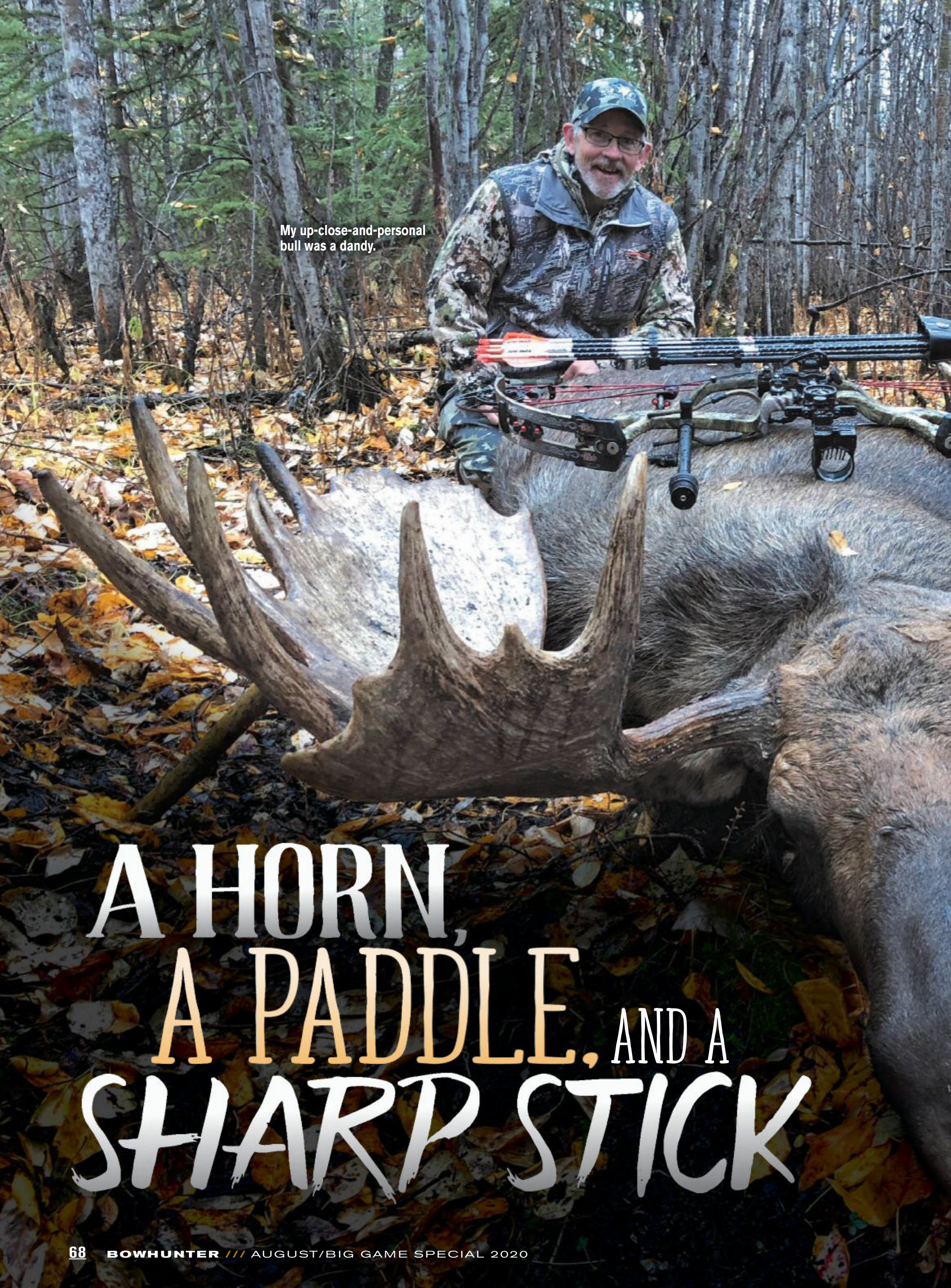
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A HORN, A PADDLE, AND A SHARP STICK



ALASKA/YUKON BULL MOOSE ARE INTIMIDATING... ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY'RE WITHIN SPITTING DISTANCE.

By *TOM EDGINGTON*

The bull moose was a mere 15 yards away and slowly closing the distance between us. My guide and I quickly maneuvered into a position that placed a six-inch-diameter spruce tree between us and the angry bull. I could see the bull's eyes rolling back under his eyelids as he slowly tilted his head back and forth. He was coming for us, and he wasn't happy!

**My transportation
to Fortin Lake.**



This was Day Seven of a 10-day moose hunt in the Yukon. It was my first visit to the Yukon, and my second attempt at hunting one of these giant animals. My goal was to take a Pope and Young-class bull.

I flew into Whitehorse, where I was met by the outfitter's wife, Sandra, who then drove me to a downtown hotel. After a day of touring Whitehorse, I was flown into a nice cabin on Fortin Lake, where I met my guide, Jason, and his son-in-law and assistant guide, Nemo. Fortin Lake is roughly four miles long and a mile wide at its widest point, and it's in the heart of some of the best moose country in the Yukon. My adrenaline spiked as the floatplane pilot tipped the plane to one side to point out two bull moose sparring along the Pelly River, which flows into Fortin Lake.

A HORN, A PADDLE, AND A SHARP STICK

That evening, Jason explained that it was still early in the rut, and although some small bulls were starting to show interest in the cows, the mature bulls were still up in the mountains and

had not yet made an appearance along the lakeshore. The next morning found us boating to the lower end of the lake, where Jason and Nemo had previously spotted a cow moose and her calf. We beached the boat and made our way through the willows and into the timber. As we fought our way through the thick willows, we discovered a rut pit. A rut pit is akin to an elk wallow, and this pit reeked of musky moose scent. Jason said that this was a good sign that a bull was in the area, and he may have joined up with the cow and calf.

The jetboat is the workhorse of the Yukon.



As we entered the thick timber that stood about 50 yards from the water's edge, I wondered how I could ever get an arrow through the thick brush without it being deflected. Jason motioned for me to stand behind an old spruce while he plaintively made some cow calls. Jason referred to his call as a "horn." It consisted of a layer of birch bark that was rolled into a funnel shape and secured with a few wraps of electrician's tape.

Jason's calls were drawn out and whiney. As I stood there surveying the surrounding brush, Nemo began gesturing that he heard a cow answering. I heard nothing. After a few minutes of silence, Jason called again. Moments later, I heard brush breaking and the distinctive sound of an antler raking a tree. We hadn't been hunting an hour, and we already had a bull interested.

The bull's raking eventually subsided, and we waited in hopes of hearing him moving closer to us. Then it happened. I felt a breeze tickling the back of my neck. The fickle Yukon wind had switched and betrayed our position. The timber became quiet. The bull was gone. We slowly made our way back to the boat. As we neared the water's edge, I noticed a fresh set of grizzly tracks in the mud. Jason and Nemo both carried .45-70 lever-action rifles for protection against grizzly bears, which were not in short supply in this part of the Yukon. Jason said that it was not uncommon to have a grizzly answer a moose call, and we needed to be ready should that occur.

The next couple of days were slow. We cruised around the lake to different spots and called, with no luck. Jason determined that we should boat several miles up the Pelly River and set up a spike camp for a couple of days, to see what the moose were doing up there. We loaded the jetboat with enough provisions to last us a couple days and started up the Pelly. I was amazed at the boat's ability to navigate the river, which at some points was no more than six inches deep!

During the first day upriver, we saw several cows and calves. That evening,

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This was our spike camp along the Pelly River.



we took the jetboat several miles upriver from camp and floated downstream with the motor off. Light was beginning to fade as our boat slowly turned a bend, only to startle a bull standing in the river.

As I grabbed for my bow, Jason whispered, "Too small." The bull let us float to within a few yards of him before he sought refuge with a cow that was on the bank. That evening, we decided we should continue to hunt this area as the rut progressed.

After our next morning's hunt, Jason and I took the jetboat back to Fortin Lake to get more provisions to carry us through to the end of the hunt. While we were gone, Nemo climbed through a burned area to a high vantage point where he could glass the river and small lakes and ponds that were interspersed along the river.

Jason and I were only a few hundred yards from entering the lake when we saw a large bull standing in the river in front of us. A cow was in front of him, and she started running for the bank when she saw the boat. The bull followed her into the thick willows on the bank. Jason said that he was a shooter, and we quickly beached the boat. We followed the moose into the willows and tried calling a few times, but the wind was wrong and the moose didn't respond to the calls.

We arrived back at the tent camp on the river early that evening with more food and fuel to enable us to hunt several more days. Nemo said that he saw three small bulls and an eight-foot grizzly. The grizzly was only a few hundred yards downriver from our tent and got spooked by the sound of our jetboat. Although the next day was a bust, the several different bulls that we could hear grunting that evening while we lay in our sleeping bags confirmed that the rut was starting to intensify and that we had made the right decision to continue hunting out of this camp.

As we motored upriver the next evening, Nemo saw a paddle flash several hundred yards above the river in a burned-out area. We brought the boat to shore and set up a spotting scope. This was the bull that I had come for. Jason's rangefinder indicated that the bull was 860 yards away from the river. To make matters worse, the bull was bedded in thick regrowth. It was too late to make a move on him, so we watched him in his bed as our light faded away.

Over dinner that evening, we discussed our plans for the

next day. There was a small lake a couple hundred yards inland from the river, and within sight of the bedded bull. Jason surmised that at some point, the bull would head to the river or the lake, which would make for a much shorter pack out.

The next morning found us calling along the edge of the small lake. After not getting any response, we climbed higher into the burned area to glass the spot where we had last seen the bull. He was there, but now he had five cows bedded with him. Jason figured that at some point during the day, the cows would head to the lake for water and the bull would follow. It was 9 a.m., so we decided to boat upriver to look for another bull. We would come back to look for the bedded bull around noon.

We had not gone more than three or four miles upriver, when Nemo saw another paddle glinting in the sunlight a few hundred yards off the river's edge. He quickly told Jason to turn the boat around, so we could go back and have a better look. As Jason started to turn the boat around, I could hear a bull grunting over the sound of the boat's motor. I looked upriver to see a large bull standing in the middle of the river. I got Jason's attention, and he quickly looked at the bull and confirmed that he was a good one. We motored downstream out of sight of the bull and then brought the boat to shore.

Jason grabbed the boat paddle and his horn, and I grabbed my bow while Nemo tied up the boat. We quickly ran upriver and set up in the willows along the shore a couple hundred

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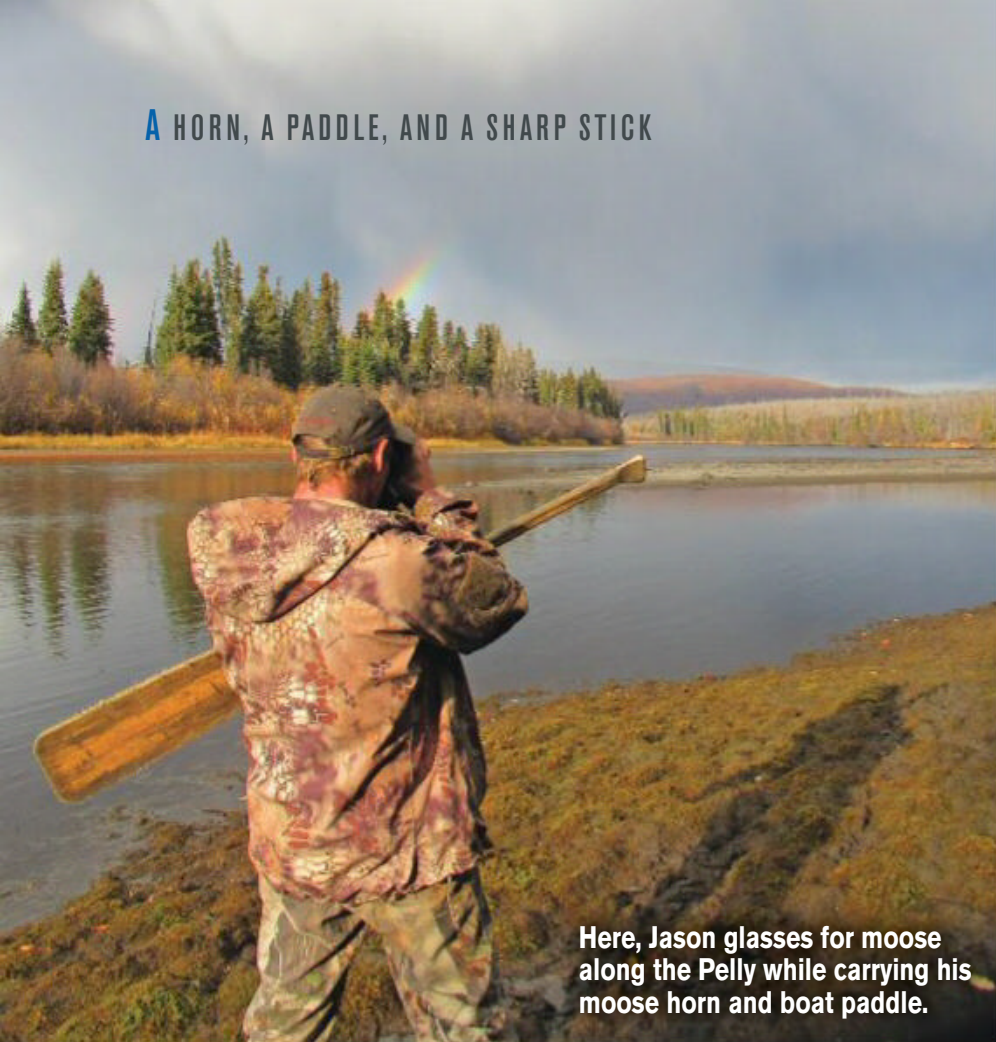
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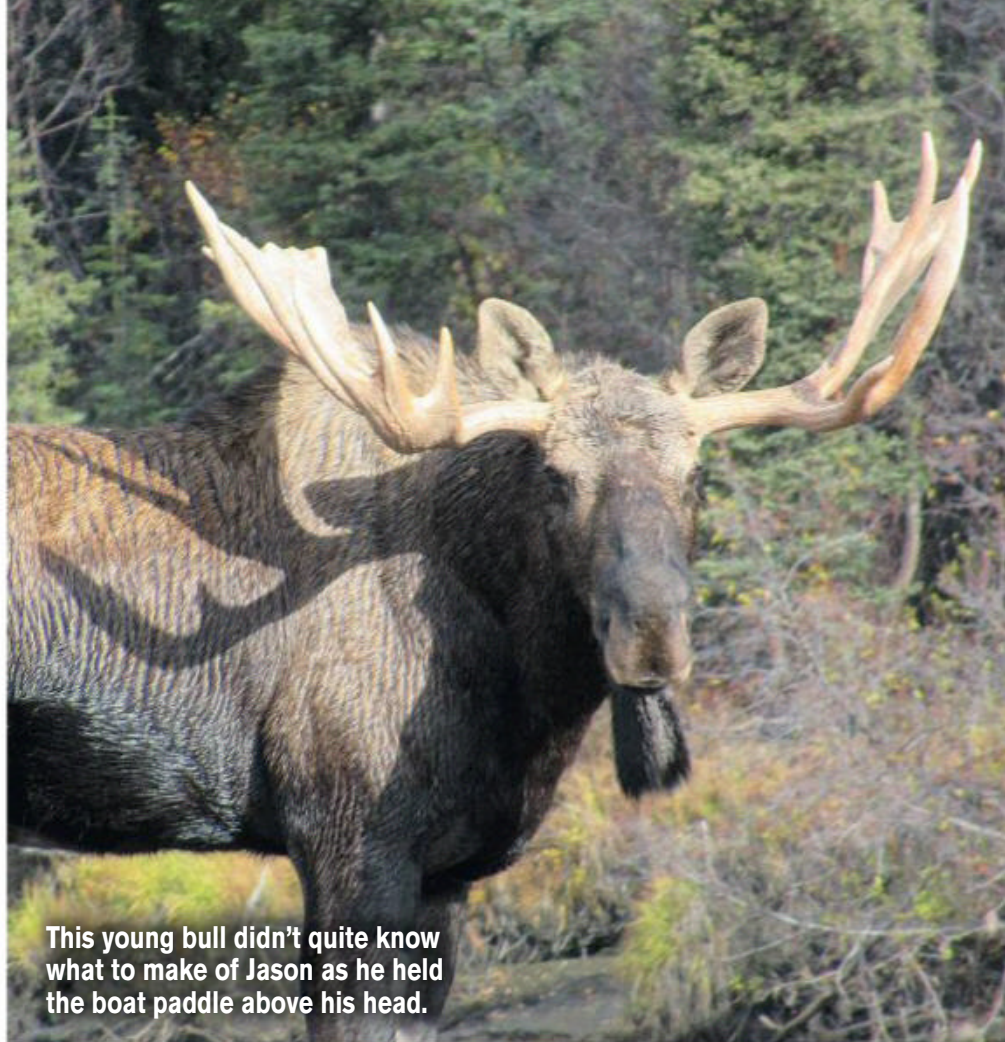
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Here, Jason glasses for moose along the Pelly while carrying his moose horn and boat paddle.



This young bull didn't quite know what to make of Jason as he held the boat paddle above his head.

yards downstream from where we'd last seen the bull. Jason began to call and rake the willows with the paddle. Nothing. Jason did more calling and raking. Nothing. We knew the bull could hear us, but he was not responding.

As we scanned the bank for signs of the bull, we noticed a dry slough with soft grass that would make for quiet travel in the direction of the bull. We made it to the slough, and Jason called again. A cow answered farther upriver, so we started running up the slough until we got to a point where it ended at a small pond. We then scrambled up a three-foot-high bank into the timber above the pond and slough.

We could hear the bull grunting below us. He was coming around the edge of the pond when I caught a glimpse of

his antlers. All we needed him to do was walk up the slough, which would give me an unobstructed 40-yard shot.

Jason continued raking trees with the paddle, and the bull continued to grunt. But instead of following our plan, the bull came up the bank and into the timber where we were. Jason thought that he could get the bull to walk along the edge of the bank above the slough. He would be close, maybe 20 yards, but it was an open shooting lane. The bull had other ideas, though, and kept heading directly for us. We quickly maneuvered behind a small spruce. He was now at 10 yards and closing.

The bull started to move to one side of our tree onto a faint game trail. As he walked past our tree, I came to full draw and scanned the brush between us. I found a small hole in the brush, and the arrow was off. The shot felt good, and Ja-

son said that he thought he saw my arrow's fletching right above and slightly behind the bull's elbow. Then we heard a crash. As we waited, two cows walked up the slough looking for their boyfriend. We found the bull piled up about 70 yards away. It was at that point that I realized we had just successfully stared down an angry Yukon bull moose at 10 yards with a horn, a boat paddle, and a sharp stick! **BH**

The author resides in Cowansville, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Susan.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: My bow of choice on this hunt was a PSE Carbon Air 34. I got great penetration with my Easton FMJ arrows that were tipped with G5 Striker broadheads. Other equipment included a Hamskea rest, Spot Hogg Hogg Father sight, Carter release, and clothing from Sitka.

I booked this hunt with Shawn Raymond's Yukon Big Game Outfitters (250/264-2512, yukonbiggame.com) through Bowhunting Safari Consultants (1-800-833-9777, bowhuntingsafari.com).

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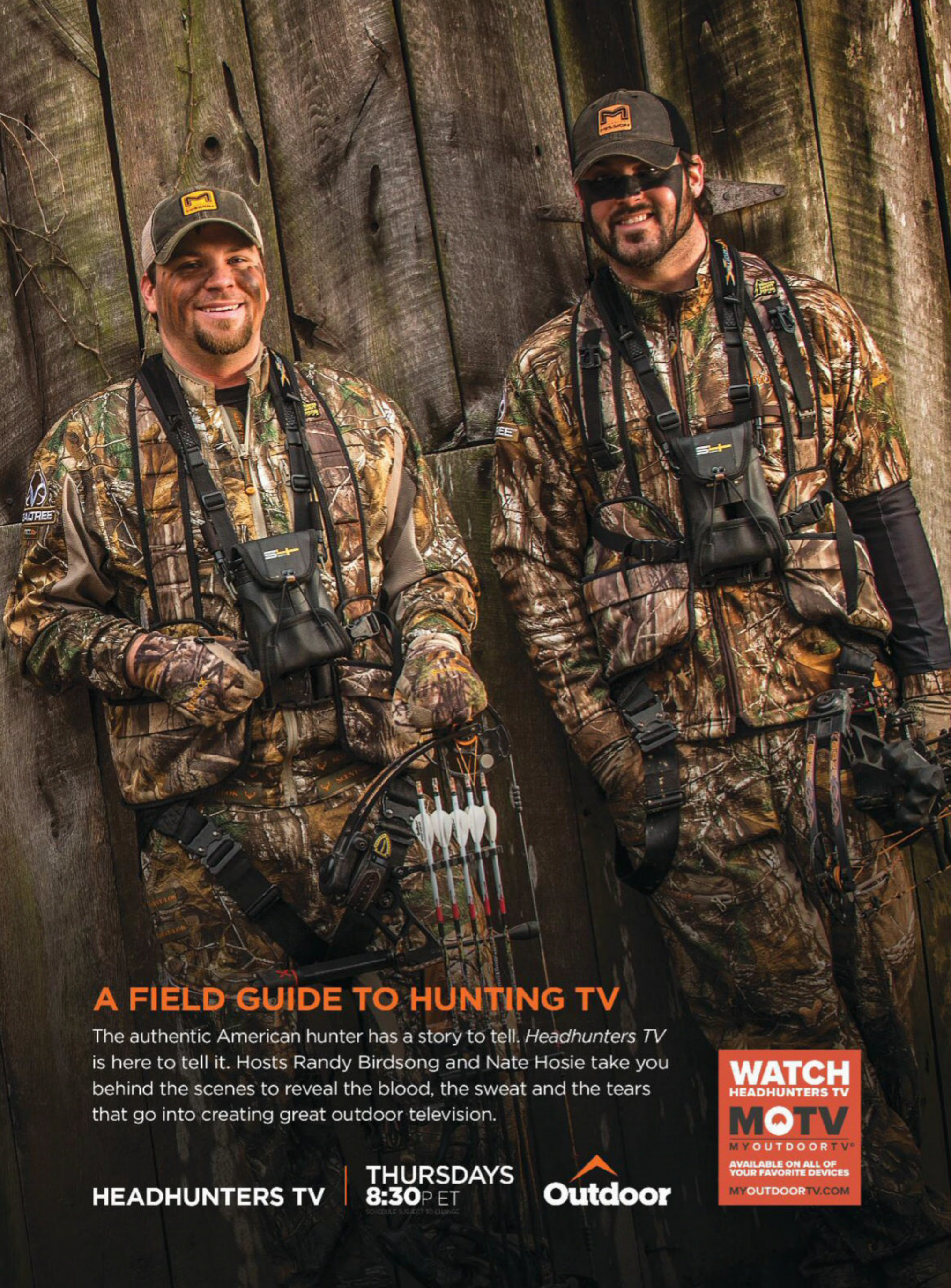
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QUESTION *I am an avid reader of Bowhunter Magazine, and I look forward to each issue and the information and hunting stories you and the other writers contribute! I am planning an elk hunt in Montana with my brother, nephew, and close friend. Could you make some recommendations on arrow/broadhead choices for the hunt?* **Scott Cool, via e-mail**

ANSWER Thanks for your e-mail. First, let's establish the number-one goal of every elk hunter — a bilateral pneumothorax — otherwise known as a double-lung collapse. If you only puncture one lung on an elk, the odds of recovery are close to zero. That makes maximum, and hopefully two-hole, penetration more important than on just about any other North American big game animal.

There are many factors to consider: draw weight/length, arrow speed/weight (both kinetic energy and momentum), and broadhead construction. All of these factors are intertwined in their importance. If you shoot low poundage, or a short draw length, your arrow speed will be adversely affected, necessitating a heavier arrow and a broadhead designed for maximum penetration. Heavier draw weights and longer draw lengths make the other factors less critical, but they are still important.

Personally, I tend to vary my arrow weight according to the species I am hunting. I may want a flatter trajectory for antelope, deer, or caribou, but for a very tough animal like an elk, I prefer an arrow in the 500-grain range. I have a 30.5-inch draw, and I typically shoot 67 pounds. Because this setup delivers plenty of energy and momentum, I can shoot most any quality broadhead from fixed blades to heavily built mechanicals like the Rage Trypan and not worry about penetration.

We don't have the space to get into all the physics, and there is plenty of dispute among bowhunters on this topic, but without knowing your specifics I would recommend an arrow weighing at least 450 grains (total arrow/broadhead) for elk. An arrow's front of center (FOC) is also important to penetration, and I strive for at least 12 to 13 percent or more.

Yes, if your draw weight and arrow speed are exceptional (well over 300 fps), you might get by with a lighter, flatter arrow, but I still wouldn't go below 400 grains under any circumstances. Will it work, yes, but if the shot is in any way marginal, a lighter arrow will not likely bail you out. If your draw weight and arrow speed is average (under 280 fps), your total arrow weight should go up. I know that sounds counterintuitive, but consider the recurve archer who is shooting only 190 to 200 fps and using arrows of 600 grains and up. They certainly don't go down in arrow weight. In almost any scenario, a heavier arrow will penetrate better on a live animal. And no test medium can replicate the real thing.

Broadhead design does matter, but mostly in a basic sense. If you start with a well-tuned bow, there is no question the best penetrating broadhead is a cut-on-contact, fixed two-blade design like a Muzzy Phantom, Magnus Stinger, or Iron Will broadhead. A fixed-blade broadhead and certain mechanical heads are next, and then comes the really wide-cut mechanical broadheads. If you hope to drive a two-inch-wide broadhead completely through an elk, you had better have some energy and a heavy arrow behind it. If you do, it's devastating.

By now, you can see that all these factors are codependent, which is why there is so much debate. If you're an average archer shooting 65 pounds at a 28-inch draw, I would shoot an arrow/broadhead combo that weighs around 475 grains (with decent FOC), and a strong, super-sharp broadhead that gives you confidence. Then hunt your way close and drive it through both lungs. Good luck. **BH**

E-mail your ASK **BOWHUNTER** questions to bowhunter_magazine@outdoorsg.com

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